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FORTRESS

# FORTRESS

JOSHUA HILLEL BARSKY

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B28b

DISCARD

# FORTRESS

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~~*TERMINAL VELOCITY*~~

~~*HUMAN ANIMAL*~~

~~*GOD*~~

~~*FORTRESS*~~

~~*DEATH & RESURRECTION*~~

~~*MANHOOD*~~

JOSHUA HILLEL BARSKY

For Miriam

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# I

## TERMINAL VELOCITY

The back of a CDROM.

Holding it up to the light. To see what scratches were there.

A computer game my Dad got me when I was a kid. Maybe I was eight.

Terminal Velocity.

Do you know what that means? He asked me.

I didn't know.

He printed off an article. Maybe twenty pages long.

Read it, he said.

I took it with me on the way to school. Sitting in the backseat of the car. My Mom driving.

I didn't understand what I read.

I left the pages in the back pocket of the seat.

And on the way home I tried again. To no avail.

And again the next day. And again the day after. And so on.

And the pages stayed there for years.

Terminal Velocity —

The maximum speed attainable, as an object falls.

That is how they described my Dad's diagnosis.

Terminal.

A scratch on the CD that could not be repaired.

He had been at work. A Monday morning like any other. And in a moment, his words began to slur.

Glioblastoma. Brain cancer.

The CD spins. The program begins to load. But it is taking longer than it should.

The drive is struggling. It is grinding against itself.

It skips and a series of frames load onto the screen, seemingly all at once.

The curling rink.

A hamburger and fries from the cafe there.

Something about the relish on the bun.

The pager he wore on his belt when he was on call at the hospital.

Sitting on his bed. Watching TV while he punched numbers into his calculator.

Being at the dump. Seagulls swooping into the mounds of trash.

He explained to me that they weighed the car on the way in and then again on the way out. That's how they knew how much you owed.

And now I had a child of my own. A baby girl.

Nora.

I would take her there, one day.

And explain to her, like he explained to me, how they measured what you owed.

* * *

With Nora.

Hopeless I could put her down without her mother there. She'd messaged me a list of all the things I had to do.

I dressed her in her sleep sack. I gave her her milk. I held her in the rocking chair. I read her a book.

Still, she cried.

I held her near the window, to distract her. The tree outside seemed to calm her.

Something between her and the tree. I was inferior to it.

She yawned. I closed the blinds. I turned on the white noise. She continued to cry. I tried the pacifier. She spit it out. I put her down into her bassinet. She kicked and squirmed and cried louder.

I left the room. Standing in the hallway outside the door. Waiting for her to settle.

She cried more. And became hysterical.

I texted Miriam. She said to wait another five minutes.

I stared at the clock on my phone. Five minutes. A few more, but it continued.

I went back in and tried the pacifier again. It seemed to worsen things.

I tried to hold her the way Miriam did. She needs her Mom, I thought. She needs her Mom. I can't help her.

I held her against my chest. Worried that the buttons on my shirt were pushing against her face.

But it seemed then, that I'd done something right. And finally she settled.

I put her down into her bassinet. And she slept quietly.

In my office. Watching the baby monitor. Looking closely to see her breath.

I opened my computer to write some.

Twenty minutes or a half an hour. Until she woke up.

Back in her room. She seemed better off.

I was getting better at changing her diapers. But still intimidated for the most part. Skipping the butt cream. I was afraid of doing it wrong.

Downstairs. Miriam wrote that I should take the glass bottle at the front of the fridge. Not the one from the back. The one at the back had milk she'd pumped at nighttime. That was better to have before bed. It would help her sleep.

We sat on the couch. She drank her bottle. It would take her about twenty minutes or so. When she finished I put her in the fisher price circle thing and dragged her into the kitchen. She seemed happy. Trying to bite the head off a plastic bird.

We have to peel the carrots Nora, I said. Because the outside of them, it was in the dirt. And so we have to get rid of it.

She looked at me, dumbly.

Miriam had told me that it was good to talk to her. To explain to her what I was doing. That it would help her development. I was uncomfortable, trying.

Taking a handful of carrot skins to the compost. The bag was full. I pulled it upward to tie it off. The bottom ripped out, the compost splattered onto the ground.

A mound of it. A small maggot crawled through a mushy cucumber. A molded red pepper core on my slipper.

Nora looked at me. She thought it was funny.

I knelt down and collected it with a paper towel.

How the fuck did a maggot grow in this shit. What the fuck.

I dumped it into a new compost bag.

Miriam messaged. She was ready for us to come get her. We were nowhere near ready. Nora was still in her pyjamas. I was supposed to have gotten her dressed in the clothes Miriam had laid out for us.

I picked Nora up out of the circle thing. Her diaper had leaked. Some kind of diarrhea. I hadn't put the diaper on right.

I took her back upstairs. New diaper. I put the butt cream on this time. A glob on the inside of the diaper. It would smear around. Good enough.

When I pulled her pants up I realized I forgot I needed to have put her shirt on first. Because of the clips on the bottom. I took her pants back off. The diaper straps weren't even. I redid them to match. I didn't get her shirt over her head fast enough. She was scared and screamed. I was torturing her. I pushed her arms through the shirt, pulling her thumb out from being caught on the sleeve.

I lifted her up and stood her on the table.

Ha, I said. There you go Nori.

I was sweating, and short of breath. She was unimpressed.

Miriam messaged again. Put her in the pink fuzzy onesie.

I looked through the hangers in the mudroom. There were two pink fuzzy onesies. I picked the one I thought she meant.

And finally I got Nora into her carrier. And we got out of the house.

We passed a construction site. A jackhammer broke into the pavement. A truck lifted dirt behind a gate. Her breath changed as we walked. Her stomach pushed farther against mine. Until soon, she slept again.

* * *

Saying goodbye to Nora. To Miriam.

At the airport, Toronto to Calgary. Home and back home.

A line of staples ran across the scar on my Dad's head. In the shape of a fishhook. He kept a pad of paper on the table next to him. He struggled to find the words to speak. He knew what he wanted to say but the words wouldn't come. Aphasia, they called it.

I sat in the chair next to him. By the window.

Football played, muted on the TV.

He told me he was doing ok. That it was hard for him to sleep. Because he got to thinking about things.

A beeping sound went off every half hour or so. My Dad argued with my Mom about where exactly it was coming from.

The sensor on the garage door. My Dad said. It's broken.

I'll go look at it, I said.

Not now. Tomorrow, he said.

My Mom sat beside my Dad on the couch. She had put her knitting needles aside, to file her nails down. Now that my Dad was sick she had decided that she wouldn't get her nails done anymore. She said there was no point. That she wouldn't be going anywhere.

We watched something on TV. A show about WWII fighter pilots. My Dad didn't think it was any good. He told me about his uncle, who'd fought in a battle that was like the one they showed. He wrote words down onto his pad as he spoke —

Navigator. Afternoon. Germany.

Morning. No sun. No cars on the road.

I boiled eggs and made coffee. And toast with peanut butter. My Dad had the same.

We watched the news. There was a fire in the city. Close to where he used to live. Before you were born, he said.

My Mom stabbed her needles through the wool, counting the stitches as she went. A sweater for me to bring home to Nora.

I sat in the chair beside the window and tried to write.

My Dad had fallen asleep. I saw that the blanket he had was thin. It wasn't long enough to cover his feet. It kept falling behind the couch.

I asked my Mom if she had another one. She turned the TV on mute. She said that one was good.

When my Dad got up we went upstairs to his office. We set up a scanner he'd bought for his computer. It was a small machine. Somehow it looked hopeful to me. Maybe in how he imagined it being useful to him in the future.

Miriam sent me a video of Nora at the playground. It was her first time being in a swing. She laughed as she went back and forth. I was afraid she would fall out. I wanted to be there.

Later Miriam sent another picture of Nora. She said to zoom in and look at how her two front teeth were beginning to appear.

I imagined, one day, telling Nora about this time. When I was away from her, when she was small. To be with my Dad when he was sick.

I would have to find a way to explain to her, somehow, that there was something that grew in his brain that they had to take away.

What was it?

A tumour.

What's that?

Something that shouldn't be there.

But what is it?

It's like. When we eat steak. The part that Mom always cuts off.

That was in his head?

That's right. The doctors had to go in and cut it out.

Oh.

My Dad wrote some words onto his pad of paper.

Pillow, Yarn, Calgary, Toronto, Painting.

He practiced sounding them out. It was supposed to help his speech. He wrote more words down. Things he saw in the room. He struggled to say scissors and Costco and watermelon.

The news played in the background. A drone had killed three people somewhere on the other side of the world.

We talked to Nora and Miriam on face time. Nora ate yogurt that was mixed with prune juice. We laughed at the sour face she made.

When she'd had enough she banged her first onto the table, until Miriam gave her more blueberries.

My Mom brought my Dad an orange to eat. They'd given him a machine at the hospital to check his glucose levels. A tiny needle shot out and pricked his finger and drew a small dot of blood. He ran out of patience trying to figure out how to get the machine to read it.

I sat and studied the instructions and looked at all of the pieces. He didn't want me to help him. He told me not to waste my time.

I went to the drug store to try to find a new battery for the sensor in the door. They didn't have the right one. Instead I went to a place called Battery World. And they had it. The guy there

told me the cheaper brand was better. I bought it and drove home and put it into the sensor and I stood and looked at the thing. Waiting for it to beep again.

Back inside. I read the instructions for the glucose monitor again, until I understood what we were doing wrong. I tried to show my Dad how it worked. But he was done with it.

We went to the park across the street, to meet my sister. Her husband and my Mom played with my nephew on the playground. My Dad sat on a bench wearing his hood. Not saying much.

A half hour passed. He got up and said he was going to get exercise. I followed him. He walked about half a block ahead of me. Eventually he turned around and went back to the house. Still not saying anything.

He sat on the couch and turned the TV on again. I opened the blinds, so we could see everyone at the playground. A tree blocked the view of them for the most part.

I cleaned some old food out of the cupboard until my Mom came home. And then I went on another walk, to get a coffee. Looking at the yellow grass. The gravel and the tire marks in the snow. I sat at the coffee shop and tried to feel ordinary.

I walked to the park. I stood near a bench. I looked at the river at the bottom of the hill. Miriam and I had been there once. The summer before Nora was born.

A dog ran towards me. I put my coffee on the bench, in case the dog ran into me, I didn't want it to spill. A woman yelled at the dog. Mud splashed from a puddle. I looked at its paw print.

I called Miriam. I could hear she was tired. She'd just put Nora down. We got off the phone so she could catch up on her work. I walked with my coffee. It was better than the coffee in Toronto. Maybe it was the altitude or that the air had more resolution.

My Mom was on the phone with someone from the hospital. They told her where to park for my Dad's next appointment.

She hung up and started texting. I assumed to my sister.

My Dad asked her where the blanket was. It had fallen behind the couch again.

My Mom said she didn't want any supper. I gave her some anyway. And she did eat a bit. My Dad didn't say anything until after he finished his plate. He asked my Mom if he should drink a glass of milk. She told him that he could if he wanted to. She asked me how much milk was left.

Another carton. The one we'd bought the day before.

I could see she was hoping it was empty, so we would have an excuse to get out of the house. To go to the grocery store again.

My Dad took his glass of milk back to the couch.

My Mom washed the dishes while I packed the leftovers into containers. I was grateful to see my Dad laugh at whatever happened on the TV.

Upstairs, standing in my Mom's art room. I looked at the skyline. The Calgary Tower. It was a good skyline.

A small truck pulled up to the house. A man came out holding what looked like flowers. He walked up to our house and rang the doorbell.

It's flowers, I shouted to my Mom.

She went to the door and looked through the thing. She waited until he left and drove away.

It was the third bouquet that had showed up since I'd been there.

I was annoyed by them all, sitting on the counter. Reminding us that things were unordinary, that my Dad was unwell.

In the morning they removed the staples from my Dad's head. He said it didn't feel like anything.

I imagined what it would be like, on my own head. Trying to imagine the staples being yanked out of my skull, without any pain.

There was a news story on TV about a man that hit a deer on the highway. They interviewed him and he talked about how the insurance company was giving him the runaround. He said they just kept kicking the can down the road. He said the damage to his truck was worth ten grand but they were only offering him five. They cut to some live footage of a traffic jam. The cars inched along, most of them blurry in the distance.

The days went on like that. Sitting there, in front of the TV. The sun moving up and falling back down again.

What are you — my Dad asked me. He struggled to find the word. Instead he made a motion with his hand, like he was scribbling cursive.

I told him I was writing what I was thinking about.

He nodded.

He told me that the laptop he bought had been working well for him, that it was a good machine.

That's good, I said.

My Mom and I went to Costco. To buy things they could freeze. That would be easy for them to prepare.

There was a fleece blanket there. It was the same kind as the one I had at home. I told her it would be good to have.

She told me not to get it. That she had enough blankets already.

I told her the one on the couch was useless. That it was too thin. That he shouldn't be having to reach behind the couch three times a day to get it. He needed something better. I told her I had the same one at home, and it was good.

She said no again.

I wondered how much this would have mirrored us in the past. In the aisle of some store somewhere. Maybe I wanted a box of cereal. Or a toy or something.

As we continued on, the anger began to fester in me. Somewhere in the pit of my stomach. My thoughts began to narrow. My gaze fixed on the blur of the passing bullshit, refusing to look at any god damn thing that was not inanimate.

I turned the cart around and went back to where we were. I took a blanket from the pile and I tossed it into the cart.

My Mom didn't say anything and neither did I.

We stopped at the synagogue on the way home, for my Mom to drop off some paperwork that claimed her and my Dad's burial plots. I stayed in the car while she ran in.

I looked across the parking lot. The Hebrew school I went to growing up. There was an alcove between the buildings. I fell in there once and got a piece of gravel stuck in my palm.

After supper, we watched Monty Python on tv. I laughed when my Dad did. He got bored eventually and started going through the channels again. The Fugitive was on. I was brought back to what it felt like to watch a movie with him when I was young.

As the movie went on they began to cut to commercial so often that it was intolerable. We decided we would record it and finish it in the morning.

* * *

Airport terminal. Airplane.

Tarmac etc.

The tree outside the window. Its branches crowded towards a power line. A handful of birds swooped together, across and back again. I looked at the clouds. Trying to discern some meaning in their shape.

I lay on the ground, my head crooked, leaning on the foot of the couch. Beside Nora. Two weeks older. Her movements somehow more defined. Her hair covering the top of her ears. Her teeth sprouting more.

She played with the lamb I'd bought her in Calgary. And a pink unicorn toy I'd never seen before.

I cracked eggs into the pan, holding her. I put her into her highchair. I handed her a piece of egg. She took it and moved it towards her mouth, and then dropped it onto the ground.

We dressed her in the sweater my Mom had knit her.

I carried her on my shoulders and we walked around the living room. She whacked my head repeatedly and laughed.

I sat in the backseat with Nora, Miriam drove. Nora pulled on my beard and reached her fingers into my mouth and laughed.

We called my Mom. The iPad case she ordered didn't fit. They would eat leftover lasagna for lunch. My Dad would start chemo and radiation treatments soon.

At Costco. Miriam pushed Nora in the stroller. I took a cart, it seemed okay at first. But the wheel kept getting jammed. Miriam stopped to look at an ice cream machine. I found a cart someone abandoned and left ours behind.

Tomatoes were on sale. Smoked salmon. Eggs. Apples, bananas, avocados, cheese, lettuce, mustard.

Miriam felt anxious by how insane everyone was in there.

I thought of my Dad. How he pushed the cart, with his arms leaning on the handle. And how sometimes I defaulted to that same position.

We went to see what books were there. There was one that Miriam had on hold from the library. She was 500th or so in line for it. I told her we could buy it. She held the book. The warehouse light reflecting off of it. She said it was okay, that she didn't need it. But I was able to talk her into it.

We paid and Miriam ate one of the cookies we got. There was something wrong with it. So she went to return them.

I stayed with Nora. Under the heat lamp by the exit. I knelt down. She was calm. She would never remember any of this. And maybe I wouldn't either. I took her and held her above my head and then dropped her down, to make her laugh.

The window again. More clouds. How they had changed throughout the day. A satellite dish built onto a garage a block or so away. I sat near the modem. My thoughts, for the most part still in Calgary.

I looked at my phone. At my chess app. On youtube.

Miriam's Mom stayed home with Nora.

We went to a holocaust movie. We held hands during the trailer. Like teenagers. I loved my wife. It was there, fluttering in my stomach.

She checked her phone throughout the movie. To make sure there weren't any messages from her Mom. That Nora was okay.

When it ended, I felt proud of myself for remembering to validate our parking ticket in the machine.

We stopped at the grocery store on the way home. Going down the aisles. Trying to enjoy our time out of the house. But still only thinking of Nora.

We bought chocolate and baby corn and wasabi peas and chives. All of it on sale except the baby corn.

On the drive home. We ate the wasabi peas and talked about the movie. Miriam seemed to like it less the more we got into it. And she was right, that it seemed more hollow the farther we drove away from the theatre.

While we slept I imagined a movie of my own. I dreamt I was smoking cigarettes and fell into an avalanche off the sidewalk outside our house. I climbed out of it and onto the edge of a rooftop of an abandoned building. There was a guy there. He held a cell phone outward towards me and demanded I told him where I wanted to fly to.

In the morning. Drinking coffee and reading wikipedia. I sat with my fingers on the keyboard. Looking between the screen and the window.

It had become nighttime. Miriam told me she was going to shovel the walk. I told her not to. I would do it.

I was pissed off as I shovelled. I wanted to be inside writing. I thought of my Dad. How he motioned his hand when he couldn't articulate the word. To ask what I was writing about. And how I could not articulate a decent answer.

How he would never wait to shovel the walk. How he used to say that he shouldn't need to ask me to do it. It should just be done. But instead I sat in my bedroom, with my comic books and my computer games. Waiting for the snow to shovel itself. I imagined going back. Grabbing myself by the shirt collar. Tossing myself into the snow.

Dig, child.

Dig.

Dig until you can no longer feel the bones in your blood.

I sat back in my chair. I typed some. I went to the kitchen. An apple from the fridge. Sliced into four. Back up the stairs. A glimpse at Miriam's reflection off the bedroom mirror.

I wrote about the colour of the apple. How I cut it into pieces.

I wrote about the streetlight and the snow outside and how it looked from the window downstairs.

I didn't know how to describe the colour of the light in a way that seemed right.

Sodium.

But I wanted another word.

Sitting and thinking of it. You called this labour. But it was not labour.

To confront the way my ego postured itself as it tried to avoid the shame of how trivial and banal of a person I was. It seemed easier to find some way to claim whatever petty suffering I could, about any dumbass thing, than to figure out a way to accept that I was ok.

In my chair. Still imaging the streetlight and how it reflected off of the snow.

Sodium.

How pathetic it was. But how it seemed, that in order to move forwards, there was no avoiding it.

What was I —

my Dad had asked.

The yellow orange streetlight, reflecting off of the snow. The knife cut through the apple. The back of my wife's head reflected off of the mirror.

I imagined my entire life as a whole.

Not as a sequence of images, or as some linear timeline. But the entire experience of what I'd known — projected through the memory of the way the streetlight looked out the window.

What was I —

my Dad had asked.

But my answer was mere bullshit. I was not a grown man in his eyes.

The inevitability seemed clear to me, that in his lifetime, he would never see me figure it out. The life he had given me.

My sister sent me a message. That Mom was anxious about how many pills Dad had to take. As his brain healed from the surgery. In preparation for the chemo and the radiation.

He messaged soon after. Not mentioning anything about the pills or the treatments.

TO snow today? Melting? He wrote.

Some. Shovelled. I wrote back.

Good. He said.

* * *

Another dream. Taking care of a baby. Not Nora.

A boy. A bit older than her. We were at a swimming pool. There was something wrong with his eye. It had separated from the socket and floated downward, in front of his face. He was okay though. It happened sometimes, with newborns. He would grow out of it.

In a hotel room. The baby would not sleep. I'd forgotten his sleep sack. His limbs flew around the room.

We walked in the street. I pushed him in a stroller. I saw an old friend of mine, from Calgary. Who I hadn't seen in a long time.

I was surprised he was not dead. He told me that he'd written to me many times, but I never responded. Still, he said, he continued to write. Because inevitably he wasn't writing to me for my sake. But for his own.

That he'd given up on me. And even preferred that I did not care about having anything to do with him. That he was better off for it. He said that I never returned the book of short stories he'd lent me years before. I told him that I'd tried giving it back. But he'd told me to keep it. He said that wasn't the point. And still, to be ready. Because one day he would ask for it back.

When I woke up I went to blow my nose. Mouse stood in the hallway, looking up towards a spider that was perched in the corner of the door. I tried to stamp it out with the toilet paper I'd blown my nose with.

I missed. The spider fell down. Mouse pounced and tried to catch it in his paw but it got away, under the closet door.

I opened it and we stared into the shadow behind the shelf. Waiting for the spider to return. But it was gone.

Mouse followed me back to the office. I gave him some breakfast. He climbed up to the top of his cat tree and meowed, asking for a head scratch. Flipping onto his back and stretching outward.

I sat and wrote about the dream I had. I annoyed myself, writing about dreams. I would try to stop.

Nora's cheeks looked more rosy. It was because she was teething, Miriam said. I opened the window, she watched the cars pass. The sun angled onto her. She was calm. She made a fist around my finger.

She crawled across the room. Pulling her books from the bookcase. Saying hello to Lamby. To Sloth. The Elephant. To Dog. To Bunny.

Downstairs. A piece of egg had gone up her nose. There was avocado on her forehead and blueberry under her eye. I got off what I could. She needed a new diaper. I took her back

upstairs. The diaper pail was too full to close. I held her in one hand and pulled on the bag with the other, but it was stuck. Miriam came into the room. The bag ripped, and enveloped us in the cloud of shit.

Stinky, Miriam said.

She took Nora and held her, to look out the window again.

Nora lay quietly in her stroller, wearing her pink bear hat. We sat and drank coffee for a little bit until the library opened. We looked through the shelves, to find Miriam something new to read. She found a book they'd made a movie out of a few years ago. I'd tried watching it on a plane once but had to turn it off. There was a scene where they cut open a guy's stomach to fish out this glowing alien worm. Something about it made me feel faint and like I was going to vomit.

My Mom called when we were eating our lunch. She was in the basement. My Dad was upstairs. She said they'd gotten the results back from the most recent MRI. It had grown more than they thought it would have. She said my Dad was cold all the time. That he just stayed under the blanket we'd got for him when I was there. He would start his radiation treatments in a few days.

We were quiet afterwards. I imagined what the treatments would be like. I only knew what I saw in the movies. People vomiting and losing their hair. Glowing alien worms travelling through their intestines.

I sat to write.

I saw that I'd dropped mustard on my shirt.

I got up and wiped it off. There was still a small circle of yellow.

I sat to write again.

There is mustard on my shirt. I wrote.

And it seemed that was all I had to say.

I went onto the chess app on my cell phone. I couldn't decide on a move that would save me. I closed the app. I would come back to it later. I went on youtube and watched bullshit. I checked my emails. None of them had anything to do with anything. The red dot on the chess app was still there. I put the phone down. I drank more coffee.

As hard as you try to write authentically. About who you are. Despite your best intentions, you realize sometimes, that you too are full of shit.

I began to spiral downward. Into an assured worthlessness. How inferior I felt, to seemingly every force of life that there was.

To call this work. What a hoax.

You have failed. I thought.

You are an utter failure.

But even failure, I was not worthy of. I was too much of a coward to endure the kind of defeat required to reconcile any real sense of humility.

A better man would have overcome this desperate need for approval. This pathetic facade. That what I did was work. Stewing and festering in self pity.

How insufferable I had become.

How uncomfortable I had become, in my own skin.

I was not the Dad I wanted Nora to have. She would be embarrassed of her father.

I was not good enough for her. I was not good enough for her mother. I was dead weight. I was tar.

I put the laptop on the stool next to my chair. I went to the bathroom. As I passed by the mirror I caught a glimpse of myself and had the thought — people will dislike your peanut shaped head.

I put my hoodie on. It warmed my head as I stood there and took a piss.

I thought of the angle of my face that I'd seen in the mirror. Maybe my beard was too long. Maybe I should trim it down. Miriam preferred I kept it shorter.

But maybe it wasn't long enough. Maybe I should leave it.

She deserved better. She would not tolerate me long term. Inevitably she would tire of me. Of my weakness. And she would cast me aside.

I thought of Nora. I wanted to explain to her, that the sadness I felt. That I wished that she didn't have to see it. That I wanted to shield her from it. That I wanted to find some way of looking at the world, to be present and calm. But it seemed hopeless.

And the writing I'd been doing. It wasn't something a proper Dad would write. These juvenile inventories of self pity.

This senseless, obscene neurosis. To take it and to very carefully plant it back into the dirt.

Plant it back into the dirt. What an idiotic metaphor.

I went onto my cell phone and clicked around again. I went onto the settings for some reason. There was an update on the iOS. Maybe it could help, I thought. Maybe it could change who I was. Maybe it could update my entire being. But how fucking pointless it would be. All it was going to do was fuck up my phone.

This fucking phone. All of this self loathing — it was merely a procrastination.

The only thing to do, was to write. About whatever was there. To write as much as possible about as little as possible.

To keep going. Under the spell of this chronic, vicious mood. For seemingly no reason in particular. It was something to endure. To type through it, in whatever way that I could. That if I could keep going, for long enough. That eventually I could get through it.

To admit the extent of my self obsession. To take record of it, to enough of an extent that it could be broken.

I felt ashamed of myself. For how narcissistic and self indulgent I had become.

I typed Rembrandt into the computer. I scrolled through the images that appeared. This narcissistic bottom feeding scumbag. How unafraid he was. To see himself. He earned the ability to see the truth of what was there. And so he got away with it. But I was nowhere near him. And never would be.

Humiliation. Humility.

Maybe there was no one without the other.

I stared at the line I'd written —

There is mustard on my shirt.

How idiotic it was.

* * *

I was woken up by the sound of my Dad's voice calling out to me. Four AM. I lay in bed for twenty minutes, twenty five or so.

I made coffee. I sat to write.

The tone of his voice, in the dream. When I was a kid, he'd be upstairs, in his office. He'd call my name. I'd drop everything and rush to wherever he was. Fearful and diligent.

I had said I didn't want to write about dreams anymore. But this felt like it was more than that.

We went downstairs, for breakfast. We sat together in the quiet. Nora ate her blueberries and her yogurt.

I was almost her age when my Mom's Dad passed away.

Miriam thought it would be good for me to spend the afternoon out of the house. So I went to a movie. And it was good. I liked it more than I thought I would have.

I went to the McDonald's afterward. I had a coupon to get a meal for $8. I stared at the menu for a long time. Trying to figure out what to get. But then I got pissed off using the machine and left. I stood outside. And before I got to the end of the block I turned back.

I ordered a six piece chicken nugget meal with a diet coke and a McDouble as well. I sat and ate it and listened to the conversation beside me. Two girls with their cell phones. Blissful in their idiocy.

I went to the bookstore afterward. I bought a book for Nora. And then walked an hour and a half home.

I showed Nora the book.

We already have that. Your Aunt sent us it when Nora was born, Miriam said.

My mood collapsed and I became sad and weak. I went upstairs and sat in Nora's rocking chair and cried.

Eventually I took a book off of the shelf and looked at some of the pages. I read and felt less alone than I had before.

I thought of my own writing. I had the sense that it was missing the thing it would need to mean anything to anyone outside of myself. It was too incoherent. It would only infect them with a kind of bland, awkward mundane alienation.

I sat and looked out the window.

The wind pushed the tree as it did.

You dumb tree. You overgrown stick.

I fell asleep in my chair. I was awoken by a brief feeling that Miriam's hand was on my shoulder. And I saw that in the short time I'd napped, everything had become covered in snow.

Somehow I felt uplifted. A sense of joy came over me.

I poured myself more coffee. I took a step across the room.

How much time I'd spent. Sitting and trying to articulate the senselessness of my thoughts.

Sitting and thinking that there was something wrong with the way I did things. That no amount of time or effort could make a difference. That the truth was that I was not good enough. That this idea of self acceptance was a fallacy.

Still, I wanted to pretend that I knew what I was doing. That I was confident. That I had something to say. Something meaningful. Something useful.

But I had nothing.

My desire to be great. I could see the damage that it did. To overcome that somehow. It had something to do with my ego, probably. Some obscene weakness. Probably from spending too many hours basking at the high end of Maslow's triangle.

To write in my own orbit. Instead of trying to force myself into the paths of others. Moving farther towards my own sense of self. Of what seemed to be behind it all. This self indulgent ruminating. Wading through the vain poison of my own reflection.

I had tried to be tough for all of these years. To find a way to make it on my own, out in the world. But I had only become more fragile.

A great humility seemed to come over me. Perhaps from the admission of my failure. This thread that I'd pulled on. It'd taken me somewhere I couldn't have anticipated.

To understand that there was no greatness to achieve. That I was as good as I'd ever be.

Whatever the fuck that really meant.

This impulse to write had no real pragmatic bearing. But it seemed it had to be done.

The humility then faded off. And my ego returned again.

I wanted to write something that would cast a large enough shadow that it would eclipse every attempt I'd made before it.

I typed some lines about the way the sun looked behind the clouds. And then I read them over and deleted them.

Nora began to cry from her crib. Screaming more hysterically than usual. Miriam brought her some milk and changed her into a new outfit, something lighter. She read her a story. She sang to her. And when it seemed like she was calm, she put her back down and quietly closed the door behind herself.

A minute or two passed. And Nora began to scream again, more relentlessly than before. I went in to see Miriam. She lay on the bed, staring at the baby monitor, on the verge of defeat. She said she would give her another few minutes before going in again.

I didn't say anything. Instead, I went back to my office and sat to write.

I felt my toenail hook onto the inside of my sock. I took the clippers from the medicine cabinet. I sat on the shower mat and tried to fix the split in my nail. Miriam had shown me before, what I needed to do to make it grow properly. But I hadn't kept up with it. I knew I was doing it wrong. And I wanted her to do it for me. But I couldn't ask her.

The house had become quiet. Nora was sleeping again. I heard Miriam sigh from the bedroom. The floorboards creaked under her as she got up from the bed. I heard her pull the drawstring on the blinds. She stood in the hallway and saw me sitting on the floor, with the clippers and my toe.

She took a metal file from the case and sat down across from me. I stopped what I was doing. She put the file into the corner of the nail and began to dig out the dead skin that was there.

I reminded her of the twenty dollar bill I'd found on the ground when we were on a walk the weekend before. How I'd given it to her without any hesitation.

We lay in bed and watched TV and held hands. I thought of the sadness that had come over me in the last while. Of how low I'd sunk into the hole of it. It came from nowhere, it seemed.

But writing about it. Sometimes that allowed me to articulate its shape. And that made it feel like it was an object that was outside of myself. And so to put it on the mantle. To see the shadow of it. And the light of it. It seemed to be what I had to do.

* * *

A new bookcase for Nora. We arranged her books so she could pick them out on her own.

I sat looking at the audiobooks on the library app. It seemed that I often spent more time looking through the titles than I did actually reading the books themselves. Trying to get to the end of everything that was there. But there was no end to it.

I wrote about the day and how it seemed ordinary. I wrote about how I'd tried to edit some of the writing I'd done. But how I didn't understand what it meant to edit anymore.

Instead I wanted to write with as much disregard as I possibly could. Knowing I would delete most of it in the end. But if I was able to write enough, that with each iteration. I would become something more similar, to myself.

I sat, vaguely looking out the window until the internet repair tech came to the house. I went down to talk to him. We looked at the mess of wires that were tangled around the telephone pole in the neighbour's backyard. The hundreds of cables that ran off of it.

He tried to explain to me what was going on with it it all. I nodded my head, like I understood. But I didn't really have any idea what the fuck he was talking about. He would get his ladder. I would go back to my writing.

Looking out the window. At the telephone pole again. The lines tangled into a nest that hung from a dead rotting tree. The neon orange man on the neon yellow ladder.

It seemed for the most part, we could not resist this inclination to try to connect to this thing. Thinking that somehow — with the right offering. With the right sacrifice. That something would happen. That we would somehow find our place. That we would become complete.

I was there. Sitting at the slot machine. Near the window. With my bucket of coins.

How much integrity could our faith possibly have, praying to these internet lines. The sacred threads that connected our little tabernacle to everything that there was.

To be seen. To prosper.

To be accepted, to some degree.

And the tree next to it. How irrelevant it was. Its pine needles shaped as they were. And the tree slightly in front of it, with a few leaves.

The internet technician said that there was a splitter there for some reason. He took it out. And now it was just one direct line, from the tree to the house. It would be better now, he said.

I sat with my fingers on the keyboard. Fiddling with the letters without any real intention. There were things that occurred to me to write about. Something about the difference between writing fiction and non-fiction. But it wasn't really anything. Still, even writing a single meaningless paragraph felt satisfying. And then to write another. And to stack it onto the last one. As it goes.

A paragraph on the page. Held up by some kind of gravity, generated by the word processor. It floated there. Perhaps with some kind of meaning. Or perhaps without much at all.

We can wave to it from down here. We can light a fire, to send some kind of smoke signal to it. To let it know we're here. To see if maybe, it will send some kind of message back.

To decide when it would be time to edit what I'd written. Maybe I would get to it. Sooner than later. Or maybe I would wait. For another day.

That thing from before. About fiction and non-fiction. To write about the inclination. Or the impulse, to write fiction. What was behind it. To write in the realm of the imagination. Rather than to focus on what was in front of me.

The basketball on the roof of the neighbour's garage. Was it necessary to invent a whole scenario around it.

To force in some kind of meaning. Enough to make it worth the while. To assure that people would care.

Surely they would care. They must.

The basketball on the roof of the neighbour's garage. The boy who tossed it up there. Something about his Dad.

The basketball on the roof. Revelling in irrelevance.

The basketball was dropped from thin air. By God.

Or maybe. There was no basketball. There was no garage. There was no boy. There was no Dad. There were no people. And there was no God.

I had lost the patience to edit. Instead, I could only continue writing. If only to escape the hell of having to face the reality of what I'd written.

I imagined some fictional version of myself. That sat at a desk. That was able to write with patience. Without panic. That was satisfied with what I was doing. To some reasonable extent.

To imagine a different life. To write some kind of fiction. How that somehow seemed more dignified than writing what was in front of me. But instead I was writing — reality. The genre of trash.

Mouse came in to say hello. He pawed at the computer screen. We played with a spool of twine. I gave him a couple of treats. He drank some water and then went off to see what else was going on.

I went downstairs. I took an apple from the fridge. I cut it into slices. I sat and ate and tried to calm my thoughts. But to no avail.

I went onto my cell phone.

I looked at flights on the internet. To decide when I would go back to Calgary again. Sometime when Miriam had a break from work.

I called my Dad.

He said the treatments were going well. That things were good.

He said that he didn't have any hair left. I became stuck on that image.

I told him which dates I was looking at, to fly in again.

He told me that when people asked him about all that he's seen, out in the world. The places he'd travelled. China, Europe, South America, Israel. All across the US. He said if anyone asked him what he thought of it all. He would tell them. You know what? I don't give a shit. I don't give a shit.

I laughed when he told me that. And for days afterward.

He asked if I could find him an ink cartridge for his old printer.

I wrote Dad Printer Ink on a post it note. After we hung up I went onto the internet and ordered a replacement cartridge. It would take a few weeks to arrive.

Miriam sat with me and we booked my next flight. We watched TV. And then went to sleep. And then I woke up at about three in the morning. I began editing what I'd written the week before. I worked on it until about five. And then I was able to fall asleep again, for an hour or so.

When I woke up I could hear Miriam in the kitchen with Nora.

I went downstairs and we ate our eggs. And afterward we played with the new xylophone Nora got. She gnawed on the mallet and laughed. We played with her stuffed animals and her blocks. She pulled herself up onto every ledge she could reach. To practice standing.

After we put her down for her morning nap I sat down to write again.

The basketball was still there. Outside the window. On the roof of the neighbour's garage. The awning across from it. The satellite dish. The top of another roof cut into another. A chimney. The cables, tangled on the line.

In my procrastination I wrote a message to my Uncle. To tell him which day I would be flying back to Calgary to visit again.

And then something broke in me.

I took my headphones out and heard that Nora was also crying from her crib.

Miriam came into my office. She sat down beside me. I don't think I said anything. But she understood what it was.

She went to Nora's room. She played peek a boo with her from behind the door. And soon Nora began to laugh hysterically.

I thought of all of the writing I'd done. In the years that had passed. I felt ashamed of myself. That I'd wasted so much time, writing badly. But that discomfort. Whatever information was behind it. To listen to that. That was everything.

And so. I should be grateful then. For all of the shitty writing I'd left behind. The years of work that I'd deleted. Entire hard drives I'd reformatted without any backup. Just to feel what it was like to do so.

A decade and a half of journals that I'd one day sent down the garbage chute. Just to see what it would feel like to let it all go. I waited for the day that I would regret it, but it never seemed to come. Because I knew, maybe, that there was nothing there worth keeping. No matter how much effort I put into it, or how genuine I thought I was being at the time, I still had the overarching sense that it was all bullshit.

To delete everything. To conjure something that would render all of my previous work as obsolete. This constant urge to start again. To invent a new beginning. To find a way to overcome myself. To overcome my ambition. To overcome the desire to outdo all that I'd done before. I'd seen it in others. And it seemed pathetic for the most part. But this idea of self acceptance. It was egregious to think that it was even a possibility. Because inevitably, despite whatever effort I put in, it would all fall back down again.

And so all that could be done, it seemed, was to stop moving. If only for a moment.

I looked back at what I'd written before. I deleted most of it. I tried to rewrite what I could. To salvage something. But I became bored. And then I became frustrated that I'd deleted

everything. So I went back to an earlier draft and printed off the pages and stapled them together and left the house.

I sat in the coffee shop across the street from the library. I tried to read what was there but for the most part my eyes just glazed over it all. And with every paragraph I felt the impulse to scrap the entire thing.

I thought of a toothbrush I'd seen on the ground on the way there. At first it seemed like it was cemented into the sidewalk. But then I'd noticed it had just been broken in half.

For a moment I thought that broken toothbrush, maybe writing about that, maybe that would work better than whatever the fuck this was. Maybe I should begin again. Writing about the toothbrush in the sidewalk.

I sat, in my frustration and my impatience. Until I could see the vague shape of what this writing was. But even that vague shape. Was nothing.

I sat in the library afterward. With my piece of shit manuscript. Maybe I should just leave it on the shelf. In the piece of shit section. With all of the other pieces of shit.

As much as my intention was to write about myself, as I knew myself to be — it was still as much of a fiction as anything else.

The random names on the spines of the books on the shelves around me. Look at all these dumbasses. I got up and started to read through some of the pages. Trying to tune myself back into some kind of sense.

Miriam messaged. Her and Nora would come meet me there. And we would go home together.

There was a thought that kept occurring to me. I tried to shut it out, but it kept coming back. It felt like it came to me from some omniscient force.

This thought — I imagined this kind of blackness in the future. That I wouldn't be alive to see Nora grow up.

That the idea of getting to be there, with her in my life, that it was too good to be true. That I wouldn't make it. That it was out of reach.

And so I sat and tried to imagine the two of us together, in the years to come. Inventing a fiction, to ground myself. Because it seemed that all of this reality was too much for me to bare.

I imagined us, eating lunch. At a restaurant somewhere. In a hotel maybe.

I imagined her, having become her own self. Maybe somewhere in her teenaged years. A vague image of her at the beginning of her independence.

The library was quiet until a group of fifteen or so high school students came in from the street. They all tried to jam into the elevator, to see how many of them could fit.

Miriam and Nora appeared behind them. I got up and went to them.

A man slept on a table that faced the exit, where two girls recorded a synchronized dance on their phone. A woman sat in a chair that faced the other direction. She also slept. Some of the kids had set up a parkour course. They jumped from table to table. I sat in a chair not knowing it was one of the last obstacles in the track.

Miriam sat in a tiny chair across from Nora. There was a baby bell cheese wrapper mushed into the carpet. Nora tried to take it. Miriam grabbed it and tossed it to the other end of the room where another woman slept with her face planted on a plastic table.

The kid she was supposed to be watching kept asking her what time it was. He had marker all over his face. He didn't understand that she was out cold.

I could see Nora was shy around the other kids. But she was interested in them. Especially the boy who had marker all over his face.

Finally, he woke the sleeping woman up. His nanny.

He asked her what was for dinner.

She told him it was Friday. So what did that mean?

He began to cry. And said, I don't want chicken. He said he hated chicken. He fell onto the ground and screamed that he hated chicken. Over and over again. He asked her if he could at least have salt.

The nanny said that they would have to ask his Dad.

He cried harder. Asking if he could please just have some salt.

Meanwhile, another kid, presumably his little brother, stared at Nora. He wore a bib to catch the fountain of drool that poured off of his chin.

He showed Nora a book that had a truck on one page and a duck on the other.

We stayed until Miriam became overwhelmed by how filthy the place was.

On the way out she said that she never wanted to bring Nora back there again. But we both knew that we would not be able to stay away.

She asked how often they even cleaned the place. And for some reason I said, probably once a week.

But why would I have any idea how often they cleaned the place.

We stopped at the grocery store on the way home. To pick some things up for the shabbat dinner that Yaya was making.

Salmon. Parsley, split peas. Carrots, eggs, breadcrumbs.

A man in the aisle told us how fast Nora would grow up. It was a common sentiment. But I could see how true it felt to him and all of the other people that felt the need to express it. And it seemed like there was some regret in his voice.

I had the sense he was telling me to be where I was. Because he knew, perhaps, how difficult that could be.

It had begun to rain. I carried Nora in one arm and held our grocery bags in the other. There was a shopping cart blocking the exit. I kicked it out of the way. A box of Kedem grape juice fell off of it and onto the pavement.

A guy rushed towards us, to help. Thinking that the grape juice was ours. That I'd accidentally dropped it. That I hadn't deliberately kicked it out of the way.

I told him it was alright. It wasn't ours. He looked confused.

An orthodox man, with his black hat and his black suit and his tzitzit came running out of his minivan, claiming the box of grape juice as his own.

I did not care. And I kept walking.

I had become a massive heathen asshole, apparently. Trying to get Nora back home. Before she got wet in the rain.

* * *

A hotel room. Standing near the window. Looking towards the back of another building.

I'd written something I was reasonably pleased with. I didn't really know what it meant. Or what use it had. I suppose it was just a page like any other.

I sat at the end of the bed. My feet on the carpet. The sound of a vacuum somewhere in the hallway.

I thought that I was going to write more but instead I just sat there for another ten or fifteen minutes. Plucking stray hairs from my nose.

If someone were to have walked into the room and asked me what I was doing, I would have told them I was writing. The word processor was open. I was sitting close enough to it.

As soon as I decided I was done for the morning. And that I would go on a walk. I ended up typing another few paragraphs.

I resisted the urge to read them over. It was a superstition maybe. That reading them back too soon would overexpose it. Or something like that.

I put on my socks and changed my shirt. I drank the coffee that was left from the morning.

On my way out I went back to my computer, to add one last thought. I ended up rewriting everything I'd written from the present tense to the past tense. Thinking that it would strengthen it somehow.

I looked back at the original paragraphs. They were better. I changed them all back.

I put my hands into the sink, with water. Into the hallway, after the door closed I pressed onto my pockets. Keycard. Shirt pocket. Good.

My face and body distorted in the reflection of the elevator. It went downward.

Through the lobby. To the lounge.

The TV was on. Hockey. A man stood at the front desk. His kids, a son and daughter ran across the lobby. His wife chased after them to distract them from their boredom as he checked them in.

She looked away from them for a moment, towards me. And the boy knocked over his suitcase. The handle hit against the tile and there was a loud echo. He looked frightened. His sister laughed. The man scolded her. Her posture straightened. The boy took a step behind his mother. She quietly guided him and his sister to a couch near the window.

The waitress refilled my coffee. I looked at my shoe and the TV.

I sat and drank the coffee.

Eventually the man from the lobby returned. This time without his family. He walked past me and sat at the bar, beneath the TV.

He looked familiar to me, somehow. His face was not unlike my own. More full perhaps, and clean shaven in a way that seemed alien to me.

I had the sense that he was living the kind of life I thought I was supposed to have. That he had steady work. A career. Something respectable. Something in the world.

He ordered some beer from the waitress. He looked up at the TV screen. And then turned and said something to me. He took a sip of his beer. The hockey game broke for a commercial. He finished his beer.

He walked to the parking lot. To the minivan he'd rented at the airport. There was a small scuff on the door. He touched it with his thumb.

The clouds moved and sunlight reflected off of the van. He squinted and looked upward to the second level. He found the stairwell. And stood there, looking down at the roof of the van. He opened the camera on his cellphone. Zooming in, the glare caused it to blur.

His wife called. She was irritated. The kids were hungry. What was he was doing?

Checking on the car.

Why? she asked.

He didn't answer. The kids took her away from the phone. She hung up.

He tried to get back into the hotel, from the parkade. But the keycard didn't work. He rubbed it on his pant leg, thinking it would help.

He went on his phone on the way back, to try to find a restaurant nearby.

He spoke to the woman at the front desk. Trying to be more polite than before.

Could she recommend any restaurants in the area. That were good for families.

The hotel lounge.

But he didn't want the kids running around in there.

Was his keycard meant to open the stairwell from the parking lot.

She took it from him and typed on her keyboard. It should work now. She handed it back to him.

On the way back to the elevator, he passed by a young woman, maybe a college student. She looked familiar in a way. She reminded him of the man he'd spoken to earlier. The man who had said he was meeting his daughter for lunch.

He watched as she walked through the lobby, to where he was.

* * *

I went over the part of the book I'd printed off again. I could see it a little more clearly now.

There was something about it that was different than anything I'd written before. There was a sincerity to it, I suppose. And a sentimentality. That I did resent. But I felt like I couldn't deny what it was.

To keep the writing grounded enough that it would not become utter bullshit. But to keep the sentimentality from corroding. And becoming mould.

I went into the bedroom. Miriam was trying to wipe some snot from Nora's nose.

We put her into the stroller and went on a walk through the park.

It had become spring. Miriam wore her hair in braids. She pointed to a house that she liked. Nora drank her milk. We talked about what TV shows we wanted to watch on the weekend. We talked about what car we wanted to buy one day.

Miriam had read a draft of the chapter about the hotel. She said she didn't really understand it. And in that iteration, I could not blame her.

As we talked about it I realized what it was, in a way. That my Dad used to come visit Toronto. Usually once a year for a dental conference he would attend. He would fly in on a Thursday. We would have a late dinner and then I would see him when there were breaks in his schedule over the weekend. Most of our time together was spent in whatever hotel they were putting him up at. So it seemed that when I imagined Nora and I in the future. That was the setting that occurred to me.

When he got sick he had to cancel that year's trip. My Mom was going to come with him, to see Nora. But things had changed.

I went back to my office, to write. I had the impulse to delete everything. And to begin again.

But to keep moving along, as I had been. To see it through. To not take the shortcut. I read over what I'd written again. I was confused as to what the point of view was. The aesthetic seemed to shift randomly.

My intellect was trying to find something to latch onto. But there was nothing there. My thoughts began to move faster. They became less coherent. I was getting pissed off. Thinking I

was failing. I couldn't seem to focus. I had nothing to say. But I had to keep moving forward. I felt like I'd poisoned my outlook, trying to edit. Trying to write well.

I sat and tried to write what was there.

And to let go of the need to prove myself.

I wrote and deleted, and wrote and deleted. And wrote and deleted. And I became distracted and went on youtube and saw an ad for a value burger at McDonald's.

When Nora woke up we went to the farmer's market. We bought a muffin to share. We went to the thrift store afterward. I don't think we got anything.

On the way back we stopped at McDonald's. I got the burger I'd seen the ad for. They gave Nora a balloon. She was very excited by it. I was grateful they gave it to her. She held it all the way home. Laughing and hitting it. And I could see then, how she would save the world from collapsing in on itself.

At home, I sat to write again. Next to the heater. With tinnitus in my ear.

I seemed to have dug my way out from under the weight of my own judgement.

But the heel of my sock had worn through. Miriam would not tolerate it. She would toss it in the trash. Goodbye sock.

And then I wrote something for Nora.

That much of my life had been the story of being my father's son.

But when she was born I became her Dad.

I remembered being in the hospital. How she screamed and shook and I saw her strength. And that she knew, already, all there was to know about the world.

I would learn that my love for her would grow with each passing day. And it would break the limit of what I knew my love to be.

I remembered standing, holding her by the window. She was less than a week old. And I saw how complete she was. And I wanted her to know, how complete she had always been.

I drove through the neighbourhood. Back from putting gas in the car. Thinking about what I'd written, about Nora. How it was sentimental, yes, maybe egregiously so, but I felt assured that it was not bullshit.

And I began to feel elated, in a certain psychosis. Like a bolt had eroded from some reserve tank. And it contaminated my bloodstream with this kind of euphoric rapture. I floated past the houses, in a boundless cloud, thinking of writing more. Thinking about Nora and I, and what it would mean to be there for her in the years to come.

When I came home, I went to my office and I sat to write. I put my hands on the keyboard. To articulate the feeling that felt so true and clear and overbearing.

But it seemed that now it was gone. That it had been meant for that moment alone. And that moment had already came and went.

# II

## HUMAN ANIMAL

The crawl space in the garage. Nails hung down like stalactite. But it might not hurt to have a nail pierce through your skull, if I understood correctly.

A box of photo albums and papers. Certificates. Drawings. Custody documents — the kids went to their mother.

My father in law. My daughter's grandfather.

I'd never met him. And it seemed at best, that I might meet him at his funeral.

He was a psychologist. And practiced until Miriam was six or seven years old. Until his mind broke. And he had a psychotic break. The irony between his profession and his fate will turn forever in perpetual motion.

As I understood, he refused treatment and was never formally diagnosed. So it was unclear whether his behaviour was better described as schizophrenic, or schizoaffective. But these things are the same to the layperson. He became a man pacing in the street, yelling and muttering to himself, homeless and estranged from his family.

The last time Miriam saw him was at her Bat Mitzvah. He stood at the back of the synagogue. She remembered a large stain on his sweater. She said he didn't stay long.

She told me once that when she would pass a homeless man in the street, she would sometimes wonder, if maybe that was her Dad.

Yaya had told me that she didn't know he was losing his mind at first. It was a slow process. It began with them fighting more and more. Until she had to separate the children from him.

The last anyone had heard from him was from his brother, Miriam's uncle. They were still in touch, some. He said that he was doing worse than you could possibly imagine.

Our fathers.

Her Dad, a psychologist. My Dad, a dentist.

My Dad, from Saskatchewan and moved a province west to Alberta.

Her Dad, from Manitoba and moved a province east to Ontario.

Her grandparents, holocaust survivors, mine, escaped the pogroms of the Russian Empire.

Her Dad had lost his mind. My Dad, still had his. But there was a tumour growing on it. Glioblastoma, they called it.

And what to make of it all.

I imagined our posture, Miriam and I. Our limbs and flesh contorted in the attic crawlspace. Our spines and necks curved to avoid the nails above us. I stood on the ladder with my arms upward as she passed the boxes down to me.

I had gone back afterward to sweep out all of the rat shit that was up there. There was a ten foot mirror, leaning against the wall, behind some scrap wood. We'd gotten rid of the matching one a year or so earlier. Yaya and I, on the back deck. Smashing it with a hammer. Kicking and

breaking it down into smaller pieces. By wrapping parts of it in duct tape, it stayed together as it smashed and we were able to crumple it into pieces that fit into our trash bin.

Her ability to demolish. She is more fearless than you or I. She has a strength of character, a heroic strength. Having overcome what she has. You can see it in the way she breaks glass with a hammer. I would have thought this kind of thing would galvanize a person. That it would embitter them. But she has shown me that that kind of strength, is conjured by warmth.

The second mirror up there, in the crawlspace. It will be difficult to get down. And I really do wonder how the hell she got it up there in the first place.

She sat at the kitchen table and began to go through the photos that were in the box we brought down. She showed me a picture of her mother in law. And I could see the resemblance, in a way, to Nora. There was a picture of her, on her wedding day, with Miriam's Dad. I recognized him. Somehow.

There were some letters in the box that Miriam had kept. They were her plane letters, she said.

What are plane letters? I asked her.

If someone was going on a trip, we would write them something that they were only allowed to read once they were flying. Once the plane was in the sky.

I sat in the terminal. Eating the lunch Miriam had packed for me. Feeling sentimental towards the way she cut the apple into quarters. To how the mustard touched the bread.

She messaged me a picture of a pot of soil on the back deck. The wedding photo we'd found in the garage was planted inside of it. But now her Mom stood alone, next to a silhouette

of the groom. She had cut her ex-husband out of the photo and planted this thirty year old version of herself into the dirt. For what reason, I did not totally understand. But I appreciated the oddity of it. The humour of it. And to see that she was still angry at him, for losing his mind.

I was unsure how much of this had become my story. How much of a right I had to feel about any of it. But it occurred to me that one day we would have to explain it all to Nora. And I wondered what it would be like for her to know. If it would mean anything at all.

* * *

You are writing about your family.

You are writing about the city you are from.

Calgary.

My Mom stood, waiting in the doorway when I arrived at the house. My Dad sat on the couch. His hair was thin and patchy around where they had directed the radiation. The scar on his head had healed quite a bit. He was more thin than I'd ever seen him before. But he looked ok.

A pigeon coo'd from somewhere. Like it was in the ceiling. Or the neighbour's roof.

It was always there, my Mom said. It was incessant.

Maybe we could put some spikes down.

There's no use, she said.

I helped my Dad fix his iPad. Figuring out the right passwords. We deleted all of the programs he didn't want.

The steak my Mom made. I was brought back to a much earlier time in my life. To be served a piece of meat by those who invented you. Your father killed an animal for you. And you sat with him as your mother cooked it over the fire.

Upstairs in my Dad's office. He sat in his chair. I sat next to him. My Mom stood in the doorway.

The carpet, brown or taupe. It enveloped the room. There was grey light from the window. My Dad pushed a button on the computer and a small orange light on the monitor turned green.

He noticed I was looking at a gift card on the table. He told me to take it. He would never use it. He didn't even remember who gave it to him.

He moved his hand and the pixels reformed as the cursor moved across the screen.

He typed numbers into the keyboard and they appeared on the screen in front of us.

His bank accounts. A list of numbers, some larger than others. He explained what each of them meant. How they got to be what they were. How they would continue to grow. How they meant that things would be okay.

He stopped and turned to me. And asked me why there were sparkles on my head.

I didn't understand what he meant. I touched my head and saw that there sparkles on my fingers. And more of them sprinkled down like dandruff.

They were on my Mom's clothes as well. And they were on my Dad's shoulder and his cheek.

Where the hell were all these sparkles coming from. My Mom and I laughed. But my Dad did not laugh. And instead he went back to his expenses. Continuing with the numbers, line by line, through every account.

The other computer behind us. The one from when I was a kid. The one that used the printer ink I'd sent to the house.

There was a program that it ran, that no other computer could, my Dad said. This computer never shuts off, he said. Never.

I looked at the sparkles on his forehead and his cheek. And realized they were probably from the new placemats my Mom had put out for dinner.

When we went back downstairs he collected them all and threw them into the trash.

My Mom was upset and said that she had just bought them.

He told her he wanted nothing to do with them.

She reached into the garbage, to fish them out. She lifted her hand and saw how they shed and then put them back and slowly closed the lid.

I followed my Dad back to the couch. He sat and turned on the TV. I sat next to him, in the chair by the window.

He told me about his life insurance policy.

He told me where he kept his will.

He told me that as soon as he met my Mom, he had no doubt in his mind that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

And it seemed that he had gotten what he wanted.

He put his sunglasses on, to dim the brightness from the window.

He asked me if there was anything I wanted to talk to him about.

I didn't know.

I opened my computer and began to type some. The TV was on mute. Eventually my Dad fell asleep and things became still. And my Mom was also sleeping. I knew that if I looked at her too intently she would wake up. And she did.

Her eyes fluttered open. She told me she was just resting her eyes.

She would never admit that she'd fallen asleep. Even for a minute.

The pigeon began to coo again.

I don't know why it pissed me off. Maybe in how incessant it was. I wrote into the computer — why do pigeons coo.

To display dominance. To attract mates. It said.

To shoot it in the head, with a small piece of metal. To bring it back into the house, its wings flapping out of control. To glaze it in oil. To sear its feathers in the iron pan.

It coo'd again.

My Mom could see how it irritated me. It's constant, she said. She took the remote and turned off the TV.

My Dad woke up and turned the TV back on.

He told me about a replacement water filter he'd bought for the fridge. He couldn't figure out how to install it. He went and got it and handed it to me.

I stared at the fridge. Eventually figuring out that the filter was at the bottom of it. Behind the grate and the metal threshold. I lay on the ground to reach it. My face against the hardwood. The plastic turning my thumbnail white, trying to open this god damn thing.

To turn the fucking thing. To prove my worth.

My Dad knelt down to see what I was doing. I couldn't get a good enough grip on it.

Mom, can you get some pliers?

She thought for a moment to where they would be. She went up to her art room. She brought back a thin pair, with pink handles. My Dad found another pair that were bigger. The metal teeth gnawed marks into the plastic. And I yanked the bastard out.

But the new filter they'd bought was the wrong size.

My Dad went upstairs to his office. And brought back some invoices and receipts. He'd talked to someone at the appliance place. A manager, he said. Her name was written down on one of the invoices. She had told him that was the one to buy. Seeing his handwriting. Always written in capitals. With unwavering conviction. The word of God.

There were times that my handwriting would remind me of his. And it made me feel proud. I had always wanted him to see that my handwriting was something like his.

He told me to call the woman, whose name was written down on the paper. He was going to give her a piece of his mind, and I was to do the bidding. It rang through. I left a message knowing we would never hear back from her.

I called the parts place, where they'd bought the filter. I told them that they sold my parents the wrong filter. And asked if they would exchange it. I gave her the invoice number. She put me on hold. When I was waiting I saw that the model number of the filter on their invoice

didn’t match the one that we had at the house. She came back on the line and said that it’d been ninety days. So it was over. I explained the difference I’d found between the numbers. She was confused. I explained again. Becoming angrier. She put me on hold again. Before coming back and saying there was nothing they could do. She said that the appliance place would have to fix it. If they were the ones that told us to get that model.

I called the appliance place and got through to someone and explained the whole thing again. I’d been on the phone maybe forty minutes at this point. There was nothing they could do. They said I would have to call the parts place.

My Dad began to rage in the background. He kept telling me what to say to her, but he could not get the words out.

And eventually I lost my temper. I told her about her utter incompetence and how redundant and insufferable the last hour of my life had been, dealing with her. When I hung up, I looked at my Dad. Thinking that he would be impressed, that I could talk to people, in all capitals, like him. But it didn't seem like it was anything to him.

He told me to call the manager from the appliance place again. I told him there was no point. He repeated himself. I called her. No answer. I left another message.

To explain his temper. The potency of the anger that fuelled it. How severe and formidable it was. The power it could yield. How it could transform the shape of a room.

There was some equivalent, at the Hebrew school I grew up going to. Some of the teachers there. How they would rage.

But I was not afraid of them. They were nothing compared to my Dad.

I had grown up with the idea that that rage lived in me as well. My Mom had often warned me, of myself. She saw it in me. And she told me, not to become like that.

But I wanted my Dad to see that my handwriting was like his.

That I could become the bigger animal. That I could be as formidable as he was.

At the Costco gas station. I stood with my Mom. Helping her to use the gas pump.

For as long as they'd been married, my Dad had been the one to fuel her car. And now, she had to learn. Because eventually he would not be there to do it.

She held her credit card in her hand and looked at all of the buttons on the machine. I would not tell her what to do. She had to try. I could sense her panic and how hopeless she felt. The instruction was written on the panel in front of her. To insert the card and to select the fuel grade.

What does it say? I asked her. And she read the line. And she did what it said.

I could see that her hopelessness needed a place to go. On the neighbour's roof, with the pigeon. At the gas pump. As frivolous a place as possible. Because that was the only way to bury the truth. That one day the computer would shut off.

We went to the parts store. With the water filter. I tried to return it. But the woman there said that ninety days had passed. I showed her the discrepancy on the bill. The best she could do was give us the family and friends discount. Fifteen percent off.

At home I put the new filter in. And it was fine.

It was nice enough out that my Dad was willing to go for a walk. He wore his toque and his hood and his sunglasses. His sweatpants were tucked into his socks.

We looked at a construction site nearby.

When we came home we brought the paper shredder from his office to the garage. There were boxes stacked along the wall. Files from the last decade and a half. Records from his office.

We began to go through the boxes. He sorted which files had to be kept and which could be destroyed. Thousands of pages.

The shredder could only handle three or four pages at once. And even then, the machine would jam every ten or fifteen pages or so.

I'm not sure how long we were there for. Feeding the pages into the machine and watching them turn to pulp.

We filled the car with boxes of his old books and records and took them to the Goodwill. We drove home, filled the car a second time and then went back.

When we came home my Dad took me down to the furnace room. To show me more things we could get rid of. And we filled the car again.

We sat on the couch. Watching TV, flipping between the hockey game and Cheers and other shows. There was a scene from a movie where a woman tried to break through an air vent. While it played my Dad told me how much he worried about my Mom. When she broke out of

the vent and pointed her gun at the hallway guards he said the movie was meshuggeneh and turned it off.

In the morning when we got into the car my Dad said he forgot his hat. I said I'd go back and get it for him but he said not to.

I sat in the backseat on the way to the hospital. No one said anything. Miriam sent me a picture of a strawberry cake that she made for her friend's birthday. She sent me a photo of Yaya and Nora playing with the hose on the back deck.

We parked the car and walked through the lot. The air was bright and still and biting. It made me feel like an imposter somehow.

The nurse gave us a clipboard with a list of questions for my Dad to fill out.

He had to rate how he was doing from mild, to severe.

Insomnia.

Nausea.

Appetite.

Depression.

Constipation.

Diarrhea.

Vomiting.

Anxiety.

Drowsiness.

He was frustrated by how redundant the questions were. My Mom and I tried to help him through it.

After ten or fifteen minutes we heard another nurse call his name from somewhere up the hall. I went ahead to see where she was but she was not there. I went down the hall and the next, eventually doing a lap of the entire floor and then she appeared from the other direction and led us to our room.

My Dad handed me his jacket. The nurse weighed him. I read her some of the questions that my sister wanted to ask the doctor. She noted them down.

When the doctor came I was struck by how little he had to say. He knew how my sister's questions all tried to lead him to say that my Dad would be okay. I saw how careful he was, not to give any false hope. He had no good answers to any of the questions she asked. All he could do was prescribe the next round of chemotherapy.

After lunch my Mom and I went to the pharmacy to fill my Dad's prescription. We talked to my sister on the phone in the car. She wanted my Dad to enrol in some of the experimental treatments that were happening, but he wouldn't do it. And she could not accept that he was not interested in doing anything other than following along with what the standard treatments were. And that as far as he was concerned, that was it.

We stopped at the gas station so my Mom could practice using the machine again. We stood outside the car, the gas pumped from tank to tank. I could see that her hopelessness was somewhere else now.

We went to the toy store so I could find something to bring back for Nora. I found her a reversible squish mellow. There was a monkey on one side and a cheetah on the other.

We ate steaks again for supper and in the morning we made our coffee and eggs and toast and we watched the news on mute. We drove to the airport. My Dad told my Mom which lane to be in, when to turn and when to brake.

It had become more difficult to say goodbye. Because it seemed now, that there were only so many goodbyes left.

As I wandered around the terminal, from gate to gate, I remembered another box of books that I'd left in the garage, that I'd meant to clear out.

My parents. There on the couch, day after day. My Mom's knitting needles hitting against one another as she counted her stitches. My Dad feeding his files into the shredder, the motor grinding through the infinite reams of paper. The pigeon cooing from the neighbour's roof.

I felt I did not know how to write about them. About who they really were. About what it was really like to be there.

It was too close.

I would have to rely on what I wasn't saying. On everything I'd left out. It would have to suffice. Because I couldn't do it. To really write about them. I would have to do it inadvertently, if I was to do it at all.

All of the sentiment was swollen in my gut. Beneath the thought that one day my father would die. I wrote them a message. It took most of my courage to send it. Saying that I loved

them both. Because we weren't raised saying that. I'd said it to my Mom, maybe five or ten times before. But to my Dad, that may have been the first.

When the plane took off I thought about how dumb it was. To willfully go that high above the ground. To let everything be so far out of control. I should be in the cockpit. To tell the pilot which lane to be in, when to turn and when to brake.

We cut into the clouds and the windows became white. I took the squish mellow I'd bought for Nora from my backpack. The tag showed that the cheetah was named Lexi and the monkey was Elton. If the plane went down, I would have them with me.

I imagined the engine bursting and the plane plummeting down, towards the ocean.

But as I thought more about it, picturing the scenario, I realized it was impossible. Because there was no ocean between where I was, and where I was going. It was all prairie land.

* * *

Toronto. Late Spring.

I sat in my office. Trying to write Miriam a card for mother's day.

*Dear Miriam,*

*Miriam,*

*Miriam, (mother of my daughter)*

*Miriam, (MOM)*

*Tomorrow is mother's day.*

*I am trying to write a card for you. To find some detail you might be able to look back at one day. To remember how things were. On your first mother's day. When Nora was less than a year old.*

*You stood at the sink wearing your dish gloves. They matched the sweatsuit your old work gave you. The green one.*

*It began raining. You dressed Nora in her rain jacket while I went to get the stroller from the garage.*

*As I walked back to the house I saw your silhouette in the doorway. You held Nora in your arm as you locked the door behind yourself.*

*Love,*

*Nora, Mouse and Josh (DAD)*

The way the word looked, DAD, written out in all caps. It was a carbon copy of my Dad's. I hadn't thought of myself as Dad on paper before. But there I was.

I folded the card and put it into my shirt pocket.

We drove to the grocery store. I ordered a coffee from the cafe there. Our stroller was blocking the entrance from the escalator. I moved it out of the way and stood near the window with Nora. Miriam stood near the counter, waiting for our coffee. I watched her as she looked through all the mugs they had for sale. She lifted a neon yellow one to show me. And then she got bored of waiting and wheeled the stroller back to where it was before, blocking the way

again. I didn’t want to say anything to her. To be critical of her on mother’s day. But if I didn’t say anything, inevitably it would come up again later, in some passive aggressive way.

Maybe I would bring it up at dinner, I thought.

I imagined us sitting across from one another, under whatever dim restaurant light.

I imagined telling her that I was annoyed when she moved the stroller back.

I imagined any sense of fun or romance draining from her face.

I imagined it would be better to not say anything. It would be better to keep it in. And later, when everyone was sleeping I would go quietly in the night. And take it by the scruff of the neck and trap it in burlap and bury it down to suffocate in the dirt.

In the produce aisle, I handed Miriam the card I’d written for her, as the sprinklers mist water onto the broccoli and the celery.

She took her time reading it. I told her I knew it wasn't the best card I'd ever written. I said that I knew how to write cards to my wife, but not to my daughter's mother. I would have to keep trying.

When we got home she took it from her pocket. The ink had smudged from the rain. I felt some relief, in that it had become mostly illegible.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in my office reading over all of the writing I’d been doing. It seemed like it would have been more productive to delete it all rather than anything else.

I got distracted and went into some older files. Through some of the things I’d written the year before. Before my Dad’s diagnosis.

I could see, that despite all of the new love I'd felt for Nora, how much I struggled to adjust to this new life.

Having quit my teaching job, to be a stay at home Dad. How monotonous the days could be, even despite their overwhelming joy.

I found something I'd written. About when I first went to college. I was around twenty years old.

There was a professor there. He taught probably the most useless course a person could take. And about the only course I cared about. ENGL 1135 -- Introduction to Poetry.

He taught us Donne, Pope, Keats, Hopkins, Yeats, Williams. The Norton Anthology.

I was dumbstruck by the scrutiny he demanded. And the depth of what he was able to reveal from the poems he'd selected. His knowledge was formidable. And in a way, I still felt like I was recovering from it.

I remember the impression I had from the students around me. Wading through their mockery and their distaste and their boredom, in order to focus on what he was saying. I remember at one point, a bunch of them talking about a trip they were going on. To a resort in Mexico for spring break.

The professor overheard them and interjected. He told them what they should do, if they wanted to write, was to go to Rome and sit on a park bench.

And so that summer, I left my girlfriend at home and I went to Rome and I sat on a park bench. And I wandered around the streets and sat in the parks and looked at the pigeons and tried to see what the difference was, between them and the pigeons we had back in Canada.

At one point I had gone about six days without speaking to anyone. I remember how strange and difficult it felt, to be that isolated. To have only my notebook to write in and my books to read.

I walked endlessly up and down the streets and eventually I began to notice some strange growth, what seemed like a third testicle. I remember lying in a cot somewhere. Nauseated by the fear I felt, thinking I was going to die.

It was similar in a way, almost a reverse of the fear I'd felt a decade or so prior. The first time I learned to ejaculate. Not knowing what it was. Thinking that it would run out. That I'd fucked up somehow. It was an ordinary shame, I suppose. What it was to be a human animal.

I read A Farewell to Arms when I was there. I remember the ending of the book. Feeling devastated for the guy. And finally, when I arrived home, my girlfriend came over to my apartment and broke off our three year relationship. Which was a lifetime, being in our early 20's.

It seemed that the reason to go to Europe, to sit on the park bench, was not about what I would find there. Instead it was about the hell I would return to, when I came home.

Eventually I would learn that while I was away, sitting on my park bench, she was having a threesome while high on mushrooms, at a rooftop swimming pool at some expensive hotel downtown. And even if I wanted her back, it was too late. I was gone for too long. She was with a new guy now. He was in a band with the two guys from the hotel.

I remember learning the truth behind A Farewell to Arms. That Hemingway killed off the woman in the book because she'd left him for another guy. And I thought he was right to do so.

I remember the kinds of things I began writing. On my grandfather's old electric typewriter. Abstract poems about inanimate objects, annihilated by heartbreak and hung along my perpetual rage.

I got the growth checked out. It was an abdominal hernia. It was relatively harmless. They would do an operation to repair it.

The summer ended and the fall semester began. 2006 or 2007. I went to find my professor, to tell him that I'd done what he'd said. I'd gone to Rome and sat on a park bench.

But I couldn't find him. I remember standing at an admin desk, asking the woman there where I could find him. She told me that he'd suffered a heart attack. And that he was dead.

Miriam walked into my office. Her dress was a warm white or beige-ish colour. She was trying on outfits, to find something to wear out to the restaurant.

I wore this to my 20th birthday party, she said.

My wife. The mother of my child.

I saw her innocence. And her beauty.

And I saw that in the end, that I'd won.

* * *

Nora sat in her high chair, her face covered in yogurt. I sat on the ground across from her. We tore pieces of an empty box of matzoh in half. She laughed at the ripping sound.

When our babysitter arrived I sat on the step in the mudroom and watched the monitor until Nora stopped screaming and fell asleep.

I talked to my Dad on the way downtown. He had finished his second round of chemotherapy. He felt okay. He said he'd pushed things too far, being in the garage. With the paper shredder. He was tired.

I told him that the bar mitzvah we were going to was at the Hockey Hall of Fame. We had gone there together, many years earlier when he was in town for a dental conference. Before Nora. Before Miriam.

He said that the place was nothing special.

Miriam came out to meet me at the entrance. She told me what I'd missed. That the music had been so loud that no one could hear each other, but the video they made was very sweet.

I had trouble putting on a version of myself that seemed correct. I tried to act engaged with everyone I spoke with, but I wasn't pulling it off. I was somewhere else. I could smile and nod along and respond if prompted. But after a while, I gave up and stayed at the table while Miriam went off and talked to her cousins. Yaya sat at the table with me. We didn't say much. Instead I focused on folding a piece of cardboard into a square and then ripping it into smaller strips.

When we got home Miriam opened the fridge and saw that I'd forgot to feed Nora her bottle before putting her to sleep. I could see how sad it made her. And I shut down. I undressed and went to bed and shut out the light without saying anything.

I woke up at about four in the morning and went into my office and began writing whatever incoherent thoughts I had. I skipped my exercise routine. And I skipped breakfast and saying good morning to anyone. After another hour or so, Miriam came to my door. And slowly pushed it open, holding Nora. She was able to get me to come for a walk.

I was quiet for a few blocks, but with a bit of nudging it all began to come out. How critical I was towards the people I spoke to at the bar mitzvah. How even though I knew how lucky I was, to be a part of her family, that I hated being away from my writing. That I couldn't fucking stand it.

I went over the conversations I had, picking apart every detail of their idiocy. Of my idiocy. And eventually I began to choke on my words. It took me another block or two to say that being there, at the Hockey Hall of Fame, what my Dad had said on the phone, on the way there. He had said that the place was nothing special.

But to me — it was. Because I'd been there with him.

I thought it was because you were upset that you forgot to give Nora her bottle, Miriam said.

It was that too.

I spent the rest of the afternoon editing what I'd written in the morning and then I went downstairs and stood in the kitchen and stared blankly at the fridge. My sister sent a photo of my Dad, sitting in her backyard, wearing his Calgary Flames hat, with her dog in his lap. I cut a head of lettuce and read another message from my sister. The results of his last MRI. The tumour was

hanging on but its growth was more minimal than expected. He would start a higher dose of chemotherapy. Apparently, it was doing what it was supposed to.

After dinner I went to the store to buy some cream for Yaya. The sun was low in the sky and I felt elated in some way, seeing the cars, congested on the road. It felt like in my life, I'd stolen so much time doing the things that drew me out. And how inevitably there would be an end to what it had been. I tried to imagine the sum total of it all. All of the versions that I'd known. To hold them all in one place. And I was impressed by the gamut.

I came home and put the cream into the fridge and I went back upstairs to my office and read over everything I'd worked on in the day and in the morning I turned 37.

There was a dead bird on the sidewalk outside of our house. Its head was severed. Its brain was there on the concrete. I thought it was a lima bean at first.

I walked to the library, to pick up some books that I'd ordered.

I sat in a chair and read until I became distracted by my phone and found myself reading the Wikipedia page on Glioblastoma again —

Glioblastoma is the most aggressive and most common type of cancer that originates in the brain.

It has a very poor prognosis for survival.

Initial signs and symptoms of Glioblastoma are non-specific. They may include headaches, personality changes, nausea, and symptoms similar to those of a stroke.

Symptoms often worsen rapidly and may progress to unconsciousness.

The cause of most cases of Glioblastoma is not known.

There is no known method of preventing the disease.

Treatment usually involves surgery, after which chemotherapy and radiation therapy are used.

Surgical removal of the tumour is linked to increased survival, but only by some months.

Despite maximum treatment, the cancer almost always recurs.

Without treatment, survival is typically 3 months.

Despite countless efforts to develop new therapies for Glioblastoma over the years, the median survival rate of Glioblastoma patients worldwide is a dismal 8 months.

The typical duration of survival following diagnosis is 10 to 13 months.

Fewer than 5 to 10% of people diagnosed survive longer than 5 years.

When I came home I saw the bird was still dead on the sidewalk outside of our house. Its head severed from its body. Its brain still sitting on the pavement, looking like a lima bean. I took a stick and flicked each part of it into the road. The body, the head and the brain.

I went upstairs and sat to write again. Stabbing at the keys. Trying to build whatever strength I was able to. Whatever mundane and elusive thing. Whatever joy. Whatever discomfort.

I was reminded somehow of the concrete plant behind the Costco in Calgary. It had been there for as long as I could remember. I looked at it on the internet. The colour of green that it was. And then I remembered a guy at the book store in Calgary when I was there last. He

thumbed through a western paperback and then turned to me and said that the words were too small for him to read. And then he put the book back onto the shelf.

I wrote about Nora. The steps she was taking. How she rushed along the hardwood, yelling Ma ma ma, Da da da. How she took her books off the shelf, one by one, flipping through the pages before tossing them aside.

When I went downstairs Miriam asked me what I was writing and I told her I wasn't sure.

I followed her back upstairs and stood in the doorway while she began to take Nora's diaper off.

Ugh, it's all the way up her back, she said. Can you take this? Actually it's all liquid. Can you take the stopper out of the tub?

I asked her if we should run the water.

Yes. She said.

I went into the bathroom and tried to be useful. Miriam brought Nora in and sat her down in the tub. Nora cried while Miriam adjusted the water.

Will you wipe down the change mat? She asked me.

I went back into the bedroom and did so. But the majority of the mess had collected into her jumper. Miriam told me to go wash it in the downstairs sink.

I asked her if she meant the kitchen.

Yes, she said. The garburator's there.

I didn't know why she wanted me to use the garburator. I took the jumper downstairs and washed it in the sink. Trying to get the stain out as best as I could. I wrung out the jumper, soaking the heart emblem and the pink and yellow stripes.

I asked her if I should put it through the washing machine.

Her laundry's full. You can take it down, she said.

I went back into the bedroom and tried to find Nora's laundry hamper. It wasn't there. I called down to Miriam. She said it was in the hallway. I'd walked right past it.

I brought it downstairs. I could hear Nora saying, Dada. Dada. And Miriam responded, saying yes Nora, Dada is downstairs. Taking the laundry.

I called my Dad, later on. He said it was still nice out there. That he'd spent some time sitting outside. But it was still a bit windy.

He talked about what he'd been doing in the garage. Once the rest of the boxes were cleared out he was thinking of moving the fridge away from the window, to give my Mom more space to park the car. He said he would get me to do that with him when I was there again.

## III

## GOD

A mange fox in the yard. Miriam had thought it was a lost dog when she saw it from the window. She took some cheese from the fridge and went to it, with Nora in her arm. And she said there was something wrong with the dog. Its patchy fur, and the earth that had grown onto its face. It began sleeping in the neighbour's yard, stretching in the sun. And another one came around. With golden fur. The two of them together.

She came and stood in the doorway of my office, still with Nora in her arm. She'd read the last section I'd written. She said that it was good. That it was better somehow.

As desperate as I was to be complimented, when I received something that resembled one, I never knew what to do with it.

And so I went on to her about the writing. About what it was supposed to be. About what it was missing. How it wasn't enough. I went on and on, defending myself against the compliment.

She had tried to bring food to the feral animal. But she saw there was something about it. Its patchy fur and the earth that had grown on its face.

Nora's twelve month checkup. She sat on the table in the doctor's office. Laughing while she ripped at the long stretch of paper beneath her. The nurse measured the length of her body and the size of her head. She took her weight. She asked about her crawling and her appetite and her speech. She asked if we had any firearms in the house.

To which I responded — we don't, but should we get some? Thinking I was so clever.

There was always a new nurse, so I could make the joke over and over again.

We distracted Nora with a giraffe toy while the nurse prepared her shot. I watched as the needle pierced through her skin. The look on her face changed from wonder to betrayal. She screamed hysterically and thrashed away from us, until the nurse gave her some princess stickers. And then she calmed down immediately.

Miriam sat with Nora in the backseat on the way home.

Is this yours? Miriam asked. I looked at her through the rear view mirror. She held a small strip of paper.

What is that?

A fortune. It was in the backseat.

I don't know. I said. She reached forward and put it into the cup holder beside me.

I drove through the traffic. When we hit a red light I took the fortune, to read it —

☺ Your business will be prosperous. 3, 7, 8, 31, 34, 43 ☺

I looked back at Miriam and Nora in the mirror again. They'd both fallen asleep.

I went over the edit that I'd worked on in the morning. For the most part I was unhappy with what I'd come up with. I began to rewrite the sentences. Trying to understand what they were.

There was a section I was working on about being in a Tim Horton's a few days before. Waiting for my coffee. Feeling a certain bliss. Like I was in a kind of purgatory between the momentum of the world and the vacuum of my self.

That Tim Horton's was familiar to me. I'd go there often, before twelve step meetings.

It had meant a great deal to me to sit in those rooms. Seeing how fucked up people were. Relating it back to my own experience. The pain and the warmth of it all.

It would probably have done me well to figure out a way to get back. To be around the people there. But I didn't. I'd been sober a decade. And I would say, at the core, my problems were still mostly the same. My ego being what it was.

Between the Torah study I grew up with and the world I lived in, I still hadn't figured out how to reconcile the God dilemma. In twelve step, the model required you to transcend your intellect. To believe in something you could not necessarily see.

And I did not know if I had the capacity to do so.

I looked at a picture on the wall at the Tim Horton's. A blurry kid playing hockey. The colours all washed out. Red and yellow to match the cups. The sentiment of it brought me back to my Dad. All of the hockey games he would take me to. The innocence of it all. How I was too weak, too fragile to endure it. I wished I had been a better son. That side of me, that ended up at twelve step meetings. The admission of failure had felt so brutal at times. But it made a difference.

I became distracted from my writing and began to think about what shoes I was going to wear. If I would wear my usual sneakers or maybe the old ones. Of course I would wear my ordinary sneakers. The same ones I wore every single day. But my mind needed to wander. And now, I was looking at new shoes on the internet. The loafers of the world. But the signal cut out. The god of the internet. What sacrifice did he demand. Perhaps I should have captured that animal from the yard. Its golden black fur and tongue agape. Perhaps I should have killed it with

a stick and a rock. To bring it to the altar, along with some unblemished turtle doves. That would do it.

I put my computer on the side table and took my headphones out. I heard Nora crying. She sounded more intense and persistent than usual.

I went into her bedroom. Miriam held her, trying to console her. I took Maxi, her stuffed cat, and gave him to her. But it didn't help. I touched my hand to her head, but it did nothing.

Miriam explained that she had a poo stuck in her butt. And it was too hard for her to get it out. She had tried putting vaseline on it. She had tried cycling her legs into bicycle kicks, but it made no difference. The doctor had told us that it was normal for babies to get constipated when they switched from formula to whole milk. She had told us to give her fruits that started with the letter P. Prunes. Pears. Pineapples. Which we had been doing. But it wasn't enough.

We ran a warm bath for her. Thinking it could soften her tummy. She stood in the water. Screaming and holding onto Miriam for dear life. She looked up at me in despair. But no amount of assurance I could offer helped.

We gave up on the bath and dressed her in her coziest onesie. We brought her downstairs to see if the change of scenery would help, but the hysteria persisted.

Her voice quivered and hiccuped. She gasped for air between the screams.

We sang to her and tried to distract her with anything we could. Another ten or fifteen minutes passed, of us failing to console her, until Yaya came upstairs.

Nora looked towards the banisters and watched as she passed through the baby gate.

Should we say a prayer? Yaya asked Nora. Speaking softly, at just the right tone to cut through her scream.

We pray that the poo will come out of your butt. And that it will stop being so mean and stop being so hurty to you. And that you will not be sad anymore. And we pray to the poo god for Nora to have her poo come out of her butt. And for it never to bother her ever again.

Amen, I said. And Miriam said it as well.

And with that, Nora's cry began to settle. And she became calm again.

* * *

At Burger Shack. We ordered two burgers and split a soda and an order of fries. Nora climbed around the booth. Taking the salt shaker and dumping it onto the table. She stood up on the seat and hit her hand against the window, her fingerprints smudged all over the glass. I sat her on my lap and tried to keep her attention with pickles and ketchup and the cars in the parking lot. Until she squirmed out of my grip and climbed back to Miriam. Nora kicked her legs and threw her head back and screamed when we tried getting her back into the stroller. In the friction of it, I had a glimpse of something. A new image of us. I saw our reflection in the window there, on the other side of the booth we'd been sitting at. It seemed like we had become something new. In that we would only be complete when we were together. In that we had become a family. We walked afterward. Going farther down the path than we had before. I don't quite know what it was. Miriam said that when she was in the park with Nora. She was looking at all of the other families. The Moms and Dads playing with their kids, talking with one another. Enjoying their afternoons. She said she knew I would never be like that. And how sad that made her.

We talked about how to get along. Because it wasn't always easy. It was usually easy. But every so often we came across something. And it became difficult.

Eventually the path crossed into a graveyard. And we became somewhat lost. We stood in the road looking at the map on my cell phone, trying to understand where we were.

The gravestones seemed to multiply in every direction. I noticed that some of them were big enough for two. For a husband and wife to be buried, side by side, in the same plot.

A minivan and two other cars were parked on the road ahead. A family sitting in their lawn chairs with a cooler full of drinks. They were mourning someone. Picnicking with the dead.

I noticed a wooden cross propped up on the dashboard of their minivan.

To me, it had always been a given that when we die, there is nothing. That we are dead in the dirt, and that was the extent of it. But there were arguments that suggested otherwise.

I thought of the effort it took, to transcend the intellect like that. To believe in God.

I sat in my office. Listening to the sounds of the house. I could hear Nora downstairs. Drinking her bottle on the couch. Miriam sat beside her, the fabric of her clothes moving against the cushions.

There was a sadness that percolated in me. It seemed to come from oblivion. I was impressed in a way, by how low my mood could plummet.

I went downstairs and lay on the ground next to Nora. She climbed along my legs and pushed into my abdomen. The mesh wiring that was there, from the surgery I had, all of those years ago. A strange numbness. Like my mind registered there was some kind of pain. But there was none at all. I pushed my stomach outward, lifting Nora. She looked at me and began to

laugh. And she hit my stomach so that I would do it again. She laughed more and I laughed with her. As full as a laugh, as mindless and pure of a laugh as I could ever remember having. And where the laughter came from, it seemed to be the same place, the same oblivion that the sadness did. How in a way, there was no difference at all.

We sat down for our shabbat dinner. Nora in her high chair, looking around as we said a prayer for the candles, a prayer for the grape juice, and a prayer for the challah. She always became very quiet as we did this. A kind of awe appeared on her face. And even for me, a non-religious, mostly atheist person. It was clear to me that that awe, or reverence, or whatever it was, was a good thing.

In the morning the house had become silent. Miriam and Nora were at the drop in daycare at the school down the street. They'd been going there most days, to get out of the house and for Nora to play with other kids. I'd never gone with them.

I looked at the fortune again —

☺ Your business will be prosperous. 3, 7, 8, 31, 34, 43 ☺

I wrote Miriam a message. And asked her if I could come visit.

Of course I could, she said.

I walked over and she came and let me into the building.

I sat on the couch there. I felt a discomfort in my stomach. Of being there. The moms and nannies and all of the kids going around.

But there was Nora. She crawled to me and climbed up my leg and brought me a yellow plastic egg carton. I opened it for her. There was a toy egg in it.

She took the shell part off, revealing a light blue yolk. She took the shell part and put it onto another egg.

That's like our eggs at home isn't it, I said to her.

She stared at me for a moment. And then left the egg carton with me and went over to a triangle foam thing. And then she took a tambourine off of the shelf and threw it onto the carpet.

The kids all gathered at a table for snack time. Nora ate Cheerios from a little cup. There was a woman standing near the sink. She was in her 60's or 70's. She spoke gently and began to warn us about the Cheerios that were there.

How they had 5G nano magnets in them.

How they were being used to control us.

How they were in all of the General Mills cereal.

It seemed there were many ways to transcend our intellect. To believe in something we could not see.

On the walk home Miriam told me she imagined having a second baby. She said that she wanted a boy. And that she wanted him to look like her. Because she didn't think Nora looked like her. Even though she did.

The choice to create a life. I don't know that it belonged to us, entirely.

We came home and put Nora down for her nap. I took an ibuprofen from the medicine cabinet and I sat to write. I considered the side of myself that thought I was better than others. And the side of myself that was sure I was worse. They were both there, simultaneously.

To focus on grounding myself into some sense of humility. To be aware of my weakness. To be aware of my strength. To stop trying to prove my worth.

And instead. To act as if I already was.

To suspend my disbelief enough to know that there is nothing to know.

To become the Dad that I wanted Nora to have.

In the night I had a dream. I was with my Dad. We sat on a couch somewhere. Presumably his living room, but I can't remember. I explained to him that I could see now that I was too young to have published the novel that I had, all of those years ago. That I had tried to take a shortcut. And that I'd spent all the years since, in a way, trying to earn the ability to write.

In the dream he understood. And I had the sense that he had known that all along. And from there in the dream I walked through some badlands type landscape. With a baby strapped to me in a carrier. It wasn't Nora. It was a baby boy. Maybe the one Miriam had imagined on our walk home the day before.

We arrived at a camp. It seemed we were welcome there. We saw there were many cars parked there and they all looked very similar to ours. My perspective shifted and I saw all of the cars from above. And then I saw a massive dinosaur looking bird skeleton crawl out from under one of the vehicles. The entire camp scattered away as the bird swooped towards them, but we stayed. We saw some people in the distance kneeling on the ground. We went towards them and

saw a blue portal in the dirt. They said we could go with them, that we would be safe. I looked at the boy and saw that he did not want to go. So we stayed.

I woke up sometime around two in the morning, with a splitting headache. Miriam woke up as well. And she asked me what it was. I explained the pain to her. She went downstairs and came back with an ice pack and she held it onto my head until I slept again.

The part of my ego that demanded to be in control. The part of my ego that thought it could hold all of everything in my mind. My skull had broken open, trying to make room for it.

The extent of my belief system was not very developed. It was not complicated in its intricacy, rather it was complicated in its contradiction and messiness. Still, I understood the God shaped hole that was there. Sometimes I would go to visit it. To read the tourist plaque.

I imagined that when I died, I would be butchered more or less, like a cow. I would then be separated into as many crockpots as it would take to fit all of me in. And then I would be cooked into brisket.

I hoped that the recipe would resemble the one that my mother used to make for me growing up. It was not too dissimilar to the one my mother in law made.

We had two crockpots in the house. But we would need a few more to make it happen in the way that I imagined.

In the morning, I looked at the draft I'd worked on the day before. I couldn't seem to sort any of it out. I felt the need to doddle. To drink coffee and stare aimlessly. To go onto the internet. To look at audiobooks. To look at shoes.

I procrastinated going over the notes I'd made before. I didn't know why I resisted what was there.

I sat and ruminated over the edit, thinking it was bullshit and that it was nothing. But as I read it over again, I was pleased with it. Somehow.

I thought of the authors I admired. How many books they'd written. The volume of the work they produced. And in each, despite their greatness, there were usually parts that dragged. Maybe it led to something, maybe it didn't. It wasn't the end of the world.

Literature for the most part, is impossible to understand. As often its very nature is to challenge our capacity of understanding in the first place.

I had trouble reading many of the classics. It was similar to religion in that they were both subjects that were too enormous to take on in a single lifetime.

At the end of the day, we are at the McDonald's and it's either the Big Mac or the Nugget Meal.

To consume these things, in all of their meaning. All of literature. All of religion. Could I not just order them as a combo to eat alone in a booth with a handful of ketchup packets.

Eventually, to feel the high point of its intimacy, as it moved through my intestines and out of my ass.

All of literature. All of religion. How to consume it all, at the McDonald's for under fifteen dollars.

To hold it all on a plastic food tray. With fries and a drink. To hold all of the pages, bound together in a book. The illusion that we can hold it all in our hands. That we can hold it all in our minds as one cohesive thought. As something that can be known.

Some mark of brilliance. Of uniqueness. Of completeness.

To take the author's entire life and reduce it down to a simple list of every book they published. The title and the date. To look at it all and to try to understand it at once.

The complete works. The entirety of their worth. And for myself. Behind me, a trail of scraps and ash. From all that I'd written and deleted and lost and destroyed. And again, I was there with the next one.

The urge to write something with magnitude. To bare what this was. The best of what I was able to offer.

Some proof of worth.

To transcend the intellect. To believe in something I could not necessarily see. To have some kind of faith. I did not know that I had the capacity to do so.

At the grocery store. Miriam was off near the lettuce. We sorted through a pile of cucumbers. I pushed the cart along, past the avocados. We stopped to look at the fruit. I looked past the oranges, towards the lines of people that tangled around the checkout aisles.

I was reminded of my old life. Before Nora. Before Miriam. Standing in a grocery store like this one. My time then was spent alone for the most part. I often felt a sense that I was drifting farther off into an obscurity that there would be no coming back from.

I thought of the friends I'd had, who had taken their lives. The reality of the extent of what that aloneness could become.

The choice they inevitably made. I don't know that it belonged to them entirely either.

Miriam came back around the aisle, her hands full of produce.

Do we need any more sweet potatoes? She asked.

I thought of this book. And where it was leading. What kind of idea would arrive that would inevitably lead me to decide that I'd reached the extent of what this writing could be.

This idea of aloneness. And this idea of family. The paradigm was clear enough.

Nora sat in the cart in front of me. Her legs dangling back and forth.

I thought of the enormity of what my father's presence had been to me. And I began to understand, that to her, in her mind. Perhaps I would never become obscure.

I could try all I wanted, to spend my days writing. Crafting a delusion of my authentic self in an endless feedback loop of my own reflection. Trying to reconcile the most honest version of myself that I could imagine. But inevitably she would see through all of it. She would know the truth of who I was in a way that I would never be able to.

And I hoped, in turn, that she would feel like I knew her, as well. Without illusion. For who she was.

I became distracted. Looking on the internet. Again, at new shoes. The pair that I liked were on sale. It was a good sale. Too good. It seemed like a mistake. I thought that maybe I

should buy them. I felt the emptiness inside of myself. These shoes, one on each foot. The sale price. Why were they so cheap? They were double the price everywhere else.

I went onto my email. The only messages there were ones that I'd already neglected. I looked into the junk folder. I glanced at all that was there. I didn't read the lines individually. Instead, I looked at the entire page as a whole. The shape of it. The thing as an image.

The complete works of junk mail.

The idiotic compulsion I had. To stick my head into the digital trash bin. To see if maybe there was something that I'd missed. What a vortex of shit the internet had become.

I went downstairs and heated up some leftover pizza in the microwave. I sat with my book, in the kitchen. I struggled to understand the words on the page. Maybe I was reading too fast. Maybe I was tired. But still, I kept going. I felt my eyes as they glazed across the pages. They elicited nothing in me. I read for another hour or so, not taking in much. Until Miriam and Nora came downstairs and it was time to go.

A blue and white triangle flag was strung across the pool. I stood with the stroller while Miriam and Nora changed into their bathing suits.

The lifeguard, in his jersey, no more than fifteen years old.

No street shoes allowed. He told me.

I found a ledge to sit on. I took off my shoes and my socks.

A flap of dead skin hung off the bottom of my foot. I'd been picking at it for the past two weeks or so, while we watched TV, before bed.

Miriam came out of the change room, wearing the bathing suit we'd bought her from Costco a few weeks before. I watched how the lycra or the spandex or whatever it was, shaped itself around the curves of her body. And the accessory she held on her arm, our daughter. The ultimate result of my gawking.

I should have worn my contacts, Miriam said.

I nodded.

Miriam and Nora followed the other parents, all holding their babies, into the pool. Her foot shot up when it touched the water. She told Nora the water was very cold. They waded down the steps and gathered around the ledge.

Another lifeguard came over to me. He told me that I couldn't sit where I was. I had to wait in the viewing area upstairs.

I looked back at Miriam and pointed upward to where I had to go.

The volume became soft from there, the echo maybe dampened. Miriam now half submerged in the water, laughing and holding Nora.

I had an audiobook in my ear. There was a part about breeding larvae. All of the different types to be raised as bait, for ice fishing.

What a well defined sense of purpose those larvae must feel. If only they realized they had any purpose at all.

To be raised as something. To be raised with any purpose at all. That is not how it was for us.

We were raised instead, to find a purpose of our own.

Looking at them, in the water, from above. As the omniscient narrator.

I was unconcerned for the most part, with where we came from. The origins of our existence.

The strangeness of sex and pregnancy and of birth. That between some milky goo and some microscopic eggs. In nine months or so, that we would grow something that was too big to fit through a hole that small.

And a little creature would emerge, kicking and screaming from the water. And it would contain all of the love that there is.

Miriam lifted Nora again. This time pointing to where I was. Nora's face lit up when she saw me.

Dada! She said. And in a way I felt like they were looking at someone else. That surely it could not be me. That surely I was not worthy of the role.

The lifeguard led the class to form a circle. To learn to float. But Nora wasn't paying attention. I watched as she became distracted by a flip flop that sat on the ledge of the pool. She tried to squirm out of Miriam's grip to reach it.

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Another box arrived. I went back upstairs. Miriam and Nora were in my office, Miriam stood crouched above her, holding her hands. She said that Nora had stood all on her own, for about three seconds, without holding onto anything.

I opened the box. Another replacement modem that the internet people had sent to us. To plug it in and then to wait until the two lights started flashing in unison. I did so and I waited and nothing happened.

As Yaya pointed out, if it didn't work from there, all we could do was go to their house and kill them. The internet people. We would have to go to their house and kill them. But I had no gun. Despite the nurse's perpetual request. So I would not be able to kill them. To make sure our internet worked properly.

I sat in my office and watched the leaves and the wind outside the window and the green modem light flickering.

It flickered but it did not burn. Until it cut out again. And I called the internet people and they said a guy would come to the house.

Some days passed until a guy came and tried to fix it. But he couldn't. And he said that he could see the problem. It was with the lines. But he was unable to fix them on his own. He would need a superior elder to accompany him.

And so more days passed and he came back again. This time accompanied by a superior elder. And they did what they had to do to find the truth of what had been interrupting our connection. Squirrels had been eating the lines.

I had been putting effort into not believing in God. And to abandon everything I thought I knew about the subject. To try to remove all that could be removed.

To wipe down the counter. To scrub out what stains were there. As I did so, on our kitchen counter and I saw that there was a dent in the wood. A mark I hadn't noticed before. I picked at it and scraped at it. But it wouldn't come out. So I asked Yaya, if it had always been there.

She said it was from the hot glue gun that she'd been using a few days earlier. She had tried to glue a hook onto the cabinet. To hang Miriam's dish gloves from. And some of the glue had dripped onto the counter.

And so. God then, I suppose, was a glue stain.

This thing I thought had always been there. This thing that no amount of scrubbing could remove.

A flap of skin that hung off the bottom of my foot. Miriam told me that it wasn't good. That I shouldn't have let it get to the point that it had. She put vaseline on it and a band-aid. She said to stop picking at it.

This issue of faith. Over and over again. It seemed that the stain was there. That it had been imprinted on me when I was very young. And I was as dubious about it now, as I was then.

It happened as it did, every so often, that I would hit a trip wire. And I became haunted by some imagined omniscient judgement. A sense of the random people I had known in my life. I assumed they would think that I was a piece of shit.

A wave of insecurity would arrive. And I would begin to doubt my ability. I would begin to feel assured that I wasn't good enough. That I wasn't any good at all.

This feeling of worthlessness. I was unsure of where it came from. And how to overcome it. I couldn't see what I was missing. Where my blindspot was. But what honest person could be

so eloquent. So confident, to write with such gratuity and ease. What possible hubris could be expected?

To think that I had made it as far as I had. Despite all of the imagined failure. Despite the endless insecurity that was there. To even have the ability to articulate what it was. And to continue in the face of it. I did not know what I was afraid of. What I felt like I had to lose. It seemed in some ways that it was nothing more than a fear of myself.

In the morning I sat to write and felt that the band-aid had fallen off. It must have gotten lost somewhere in my sock. I wrote for an hour or so. Until Nora woke up. I took her out of her crib and changed her and dressed her. I lay on the ground downstairs. She climbed back and forth across the couch. Taking all of her toys and smashing them together.

She took the Zaida character from her dollhouse. He had been eaten by Yaya's dog. His hand bit off, his suspenders tattered and the top of his head gnawed into.

Nora reached her hand out. For me to give her my hand, to help her to walk. We went onto the chair, onto the stool, onto the box, onto the couch, back onto the stool, onto the chair, onto the couch, again and again.

At breakfast, she took a handful of scrambled eggs and tossed them onto the ground. She had learned that if she didn't want to eat something she could just throw it off her high chair, into oblivion, never to be seen again.

I took a piece of cheese from the fridge and showed her it was closed in my hand. She laughed as she pried open my fingers to get it. She took it and ate a bite of it and then took it

from her mouth and put it into mine. She opened her mouth and then stuck out her tongue, until I did the same, to prove that I'd eaten it.

She took a piece of avocado and squished it in her fist and them smeared her hand across the table. And then she tried to eat some of it and it went all over her nose and mouth and she laughed. I sat on the step stool and tried to clean her up, and she reached her hand outward and pushed the avocado into my cheek and she laughed hysterically and I saw her mother's face.

And I laughed too. It seemed to me, that I'd never been so lost in laughter, then when I was with her.

The chaos and intensity of taking care of her. It was all consuming. It was frightening and exhausting. It had changed me. And it had made me realize, in a way, that my life had only begun.

Getting ready to go to the park afterward. Nora screamed when I tried to put her shoes on. She pulled her arms out of her sweater and ripped her hat off and threw it on the ground.

I sat on the ground next to her and surrendered. We would stay there all afternoon if she wanted. And if we didn't go to the park, fine.

She tried on Mama's sandal. And Mama's sneaker. And Mama's high heel. She took my shoe off and tried it on her foot. She took her velcro shoe and put it onto my big toe. We sat there for another half an hour, until we'd gone through every shoe in the closet. And then she decided it was time to put her shoes on.

She couldn't get them on right, so she looked up at me to help her. Her sock had bunched up on her foot. I straightened it so she could fit her shoe on. We strapped the velcro across. She

stood up and reached her arm out. I put it through the sleeve of her sweater and then through her other arm. I put her hat on her head.

Hat, hat, she said.

I put my hat on.

Dada hat, she said. Nora hat, she said.

I pushed her along in her green car. The cup holder was filled with rainwater. We picked a white flower. She dipped it into the water and put it into the steering wheel.

She found a stick on the ground. She took it and dug it into the dirt and then threw it. I pushed her on the swing. We looked at a spider on the fence, crawling along its web.

How simple things became when I was with her. Seeing the world anew. She stared up at the spider, in awe.

My desire to be successful. It felt like the result of an acute neurosis that my feeble, weak minded narcissism desperately projected onto my thoughts. To fill whatever void.

But to overcome it, somehow. To let go of my endless need for attention and validation.

I snapped out of my delirium, seeing Nora move a handful of dirt towards her mouth. I pulled her hand away, but still she tried with all her might to eat it.

We went back onto the swing again. We balanced along the bench. We walked along the wobbling caterpillar. We went down the slide. Her hair static-ing upward. Her sunscreen'd hand slipping away from mine.

As we walked through the sun, a wave of endorphins, or something of the sort, came over me and in my exhaustion, as I pushed Nora's green car, bumping along the road, I saw that I had no grit, only weakness.

And that was the end.

As we walked into the horizon, I felt some omniscient sense of judgement from above. It was something singular at first. But seemed to fade off almost as soon as I'd noticed it. And then random names began to appear in the sky above us. Perhaps they were the names of those whose judgement I felt. All of those people floating around in the ether. Whatever omniscient force it was.

The executive producer. The production designer. The transport captain. Their names fading in and out as I pushed Nora's car along.

And soon there were so many names on the screen that it was impossible to keep track of them all. And eventually the soundtrack began to change and it no longer resembled our movie at all.

The people in the theatre began to rustle around. They got up out of their seats and left the theatre. Until the only people left were those who worked there.

They swept the popcorn into their dustpans, dumping the wax mounds of kernels and corroded fountain drinks into the trash.

As I walked out of the theatre I thought less about the movie I'd watched and instead more about the ads that had played before the movie had even begun. I was offended by their indiscretion. I felt no sense of mercy. I had no forgiveness to offer them.

I stood outside the movie theatre. The sun beating down onto the asphalt, blurring the parkade across the lot and warbling the yellow railing ahead.

I took the ticket stub from my pocket. And crumpled it up along with the rest of the crap that was there. A wrapper and some crumbs from one of Nora's apple bars. The plastic lid from one of her squeezee packs. And the fortune —

☺ Your business will be prosperous. 3, 7, 8, 31, 34, 43 ☺

## IV

## FORTRESS

Pushing Nora's stroller. In the humidity the grass became a single object. The sun puddled into white and soaked into our bodies, connecting us into a human soup. I held the phone under my ear, the signal, a string of lightning, cutting through the mucky air for some two thousand miles and puncturing through the white steel exterior of the car my parent's drove.

On their way to the grocery store.

What can we get for Nora?

I'm sure whatever is in the fridge is fine. We'll go shopping when we get there.

They told me to ask Miriam.

Any kind of berries that were on sale, she said. Milk. Eggs. Avocados if they looked good.

Ok.

The path curved. I looked at my phone again. A message from the airline. Our flight had been cancelled, for seemingly no reason at all. No mechanical failure, no security threat. No act of God.

Hold music began to play. An idiotic fucking tune, static-ing along, over and over again, through the shitty little phone speaker.

Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. Forty five. My patience became more frail.

It seemed now, for the money you paid them, that these airlines saw it best to just boot you in the nuts, hard enough to send you flying through the sky, like a champagne cork, somewhere

towards the vague direction of where you intended to be. And fine, if it was just me. But travelling with a wife and a baby. With the stroller and the carseat and the milk. And the diapers and the onesies and the stuffed animals. And the noise machines and the screaming and the crying. The boot was not enough for all of that. Instead, they would have to wheel out the swinging log and they would need to —

Finally, a woman picked up. I was surprised by her competence and her efficiency. She got us onto a flight the following day.

After we hung up, I noticed something lingering above me. It took me a moment to understand what it was.

A tangled warm beige, pink orb of galvanized lard. Like a salt lamp. Or one of those fatberg things that form in the sewer. It floated above me like a jellyfish. And it was filled with the seething annoyance and the vile irritation that'd built up inside of me while I was waiting on the phone for that hour.

I took a swiss army knife from my desk drawer and climbed up onto my chair. I pulled the knife back, to puncture it, to drain the abscess. When Miriam appeared in the doorway, holding Nora.

Please don't, she said. Cringing at the inevitable mess I was about to make. I lowered the knife. And climbed down off the chair. She passed Nora to me and went downstairs. Returning a moment later, with an empty tupperware. She handed it to me. To take the thing that floated above me, whatever it was, and to save it for later.

Nora sat on the floor of my office. She had begun to understand how a door opened and how it closed. She laughed every time she saw her Mom on the other side. Until she became distracted. By a pink extension cord on the ground. She took it and pulled it towards her mouth. I grabbed it from her and directed her back towards Miriam. And then, wobbling along — she took her first steps.

One.

Two.

Three.

Almost four, before toppling back towards Miriam. And along the highway, to the airport. Our luggage on a cart. Through security, to the gate. And onto the plane. To Calgary.

My Mom had rolled out a large plastic sheet to protect the rug in the living room.

Nora sat and hit her hand against it, trying to feel the flowers that were printed underneath. Unsure if they were real or not. My Dad watched football on the TV behind her. She looked up at him, as he raised the remote towards the screen.

My Dad and I got back to cleaning out the garage. We moved the fridge farther from the window, to make more room for the car. We reorganized the tarps on the shelves. He still had the black aluminum baseball bat we had growing up. I remembered being in the field with him. How he'd throw the ball into the air and how it popped off the bat and soared into the sky.

I went through my final box of books, setting a few aside. I would take the rest to the bookstore.

Nora and Miriam stayed home, but my Dad decided he would come along. He wore his Calgary Flames hat, his sweater was tucked into his pants. The dust clouded around him as he walked around the dirt parking lot outside the bookstore.

When we got back into the car, he asked about going for lunch.

Where do you want to go? My Mom asked.

Big Mac, he said.

So we went to the drive-thru. And my Mom and Dad each ordered a Big Mac meal. My Dad's with a Diet Coke. My Mom's with an iced coffee. I ordered a chicken nugget meal with sweet and sour sauce and a Diet Coke. We sat in the parking lot and watched the cars pass while we ate.

Miriam stood next to my Dad, at the kitchen island. He showed her how he took his chemotherapy medication. She watched as he cut open the packaging and dropped the pill into a plastic cup. He showed her that you could not touch the pill. That you used the cup to toss it back, down your throat.

We went around the house with a box of lightbulbs, replacing the ones that had burnt out. I stood on a chair in his bedroom, trying to yank a bulb from the ceiling. My Dad sat on his bed. He opened his nightstand and crumpled up some paper, and moved some other random things around. He took a ring and looked at it, under the new light. It was his Dad's wedding ring. It barely fit past my knuckle. I noticed a marking on the inside of it. It'd been resized, likely made smaller to fit him in the last years of his life.

When my Uncle was over, he told me a story about my Zaida. In World War II, he was training to be a pilot in the air force. At some point his sergeant called him a dirty Jew, so my Zaida tried to kick the shit out of him. He was transferred out of pilot training and became a tail gunner instead.

My Dad laughed and remembered an old expression their Uncle used to say — Do me a favour and don't do me any favours.

The week went by as it did.

And after a hailstorm our flight home was delayed three days. Which I spent on hold with the airline, listening to that idiotic fucking tune, static-ing along, over and over again, through the shitty little phone speaker.

Until I sat, the seat next to me empty. Miriam was with Nora, trying to settle her at the back of the plane. Where the engine worked to drown her cry. She had been hysterical for the entire flight. A hundred or so people breathing between us.

The sun set out the window, the sky turned pink and orange and all of that. I turned my Zaida's ring around my finger.

I closed the latch on the table tray and stepped over the woman at the end of our row and made my way to the back of the plane. Miriam cradled Nora and sang to her. Their delirium the same. Like water poured into another bowl of water.

It seemed, there was nothing left to do but to listen to her cry. To surrender to the attunement it demanded. To hear it was not the incessant ouroborian hellscape that the hold music had been. To hear the unbridled vitality that it was.

* * *

I sat in my irritation. That the last chapter didn't feel good enough. To recognize what the discomfort revealed. To realize what I'd failed to articulate.

The difficulty of being in a family.

The inability to be honest. And the indulgence sometimes, of honesty. Those things beside one another.

What I omitted and what I seemed unable to gather. The ways in which my mind tried to hide certain details. And inevitably, maybe in attempt to even render them at all, created fiction from reality.

To recognize the shame that I felt. Of being away from my parents. To recognize the idea that lingered in my mind. That I had failed them. That I had abandoned them.

The side of myself that felt inferior. That felt the need to be something more than I was. If I was not who I was, in person. Maybe I could be, in my writing. So to write, and to rewrite and to edit.

But the mirror was the mirror. And still, I sat in my irritation, that the last chapter did not feel good enough. But to see the value of that discomfort. The traction it created. What was stored beneath it.

I opened the fridge. The tupperware was still there. Congealed and rotten and apart.

I sent my Dad a picture that Miriam took of Nora.

Front yard? He asked.

That's right. I wrote back.

6200 steps before lunch.

More than us.

Rain? He asked.

Yes. Clearing up. I said.

We went for a walk. Nora and Miriam were going to a friend's house. Instead I would go spend some time at the library.

I looked through all of the book spines. Picking off anything that seemed remotely interesting. I read the opening pages. But even the undisputed classics. I noticed how I could only seem to read three or four pages before my thoughts split off towards the impulse to check my phone.

It is very difficult to write the beginning of a book. To decide what the first pages should be. The amount of pressure that weighs on that decision. I thought of my own book. I would do what I could to not overwrite its beginning. But I knew how inevitable it was.

Some of the books, the newer ones especially, seemed so desperate to hook the reader in their openings. The pathetic need they felt, to compete against the other books on the shelf. To scream and cry for attention. Instead of being what they were.

I continued going through the books. Reading the first few pages of anything that took my interest. And when my attention diverted I made no effort to focus. Instead, I put the book back on the shelf and moved on to the next one, trying to trust the instinct of my distraction. My subconscious, maybe, was looking for something that it didn't have time to explain to me.

I finished going through all of the shelves, all the way through Z. And then I went back to A and started through it all again. Finally, I came across something that I'd missed the first time around. It was a book about the life of Rembrandt.

I went through a bit of it and soon lost track of how many pages I'd read. It required no effort. I sat on the ground and read. And then I leaned against the wall and read. And then I sat on a chair and read. I continued to read until Miriam messaged me and said that they would be done at her friend's house in about fifteen minutes. I signed the book out and met them outside.

When we came home, I sat on the couch and read more of the book while Miriam cooked dinner. And then I read it at the dinner table after we ate. I read some after Nora went to bed. And then I read more upstairs, until we went to sleep.

To think of Rembrandt and the loss he endured. Until the very end of his life. And still he continued to paint. Because that was what he had to do. To get along each day. It seemed to me that it was not his talent, so much as his perseverance that made him what he was.

And it seemed, inevitably, that the sobriety of his complete humility was ultimately his fuel. He had found an ability to bring a kind of life to his paintings, through the clarity of the integrity he garnered, that even now, when we look back at his work, hundreds of years later, we are able to see the truth of ourselves.

I continued to read the Rembrandt book in the morning, and for most of the next day. I was looking up some of his work on the internet and I saw that by chance some of his paintings were on display at one of the art galleries downtown. I decided I would go down and see them.

On the subway there, I noticed how little connection I felt to all of the people around me. All of us trapped below the ground. All of us at the mercy of nothing more than the fare we had paid.

When I got to the gallery it took me a bit of circling around to find what I was looking for. I felt a familiar disdain for most all the art that was there. It was all objective dog shit.

Until I found, in a small room, the Rembrandt paintings. I looked at each of them, thinking of what they were, and I felt a close sense of connection to them — more so than the strangers on the subway, more so than the people that stood around me, and maybe in some ways more so than my own self.

One of the portraits stood out to me in specific. A man with a long beard, a bald head, and a kippah. The way his gaze was directed downward. Maybe he was reading something. I recognized him. I had a sense of his struggle, that it was of his time and of the world he was born into. And this man, this anonymous Jew who had been dead now for some 400 years, I could see myself in him. And I did not expect him to be anything more than what he was.

* * *

I sat in the food court of Dufferin Mall. I had lived near there when I'd first moved to Toronto some thirteen years earlier. I would go there sometimes with my old friend Wil.

We would eat at the McDonald's on Friday nights, to celebrate our own Sabbath of sorts.

We would talk about what we were working on. He would tell me how his paintings were going. I would tell him about my writing. We would intoxicate one another with the promise of recognition and greatness. He was a genius, and I was a genius.

It seemed they'd renovated the food court since then. I hadn't remembered the massive skylight being there before, but maybe it was.

Wil had killed himself in the meantime. And the McDonald's had become a Popeye's. But I was still there.

The bastard question. Of where the impulse came from. To become the idiot genius.

To reconcile the delusion of grandeur. To accept the inevitability of what was there. Shanghai 360. A&W. New York Fries. Mac's Sushi. Pizza Pizza. KFC. Subway.

The wheels of the toaster oven turn. The microwave glows, a speck of tinfoil sparks. Tar and goo flame and roast off of a spit somewhere between the pit of my stomach and the height of my solar plexus. The tupperware in the fridge at home. Sitting untouched on the shelf. For weeks now.

To do what you could to accept the propensity towards this kind of melancholy. As a gift that allowed a path inward. But not without a cost, as Wil inevitably proved. And so to sit and sear it over the fire. Watching the little flames catch. From which restaurant, I was no longer sure.

There was another painting I'd seen when I was at the art gallery the week before. Of St. Paul the Hermit.

He lived alone in a cave in the desert. And every day a bird would come and bring him a small piece of bread. And St. Paul the Hermit would sit there and do nothing. Except pray, presumably. And that was the extent of his life.

The fear on his face, and the weakness. And the strength and the endurance. I could see that he was unashamed of what it was.

It seemed he had found a way to accept it. And he could endure it, through his faith in God.

But I was not St. Paul the Hermit.

I was St. Joshua. The Apostle of Dufferin Mall.

And despite all that I had, the aloneness still ran wild.

* * *

I woke up around four in the morning, in a kind of panic. I didn't understand where my thoughts were.

I went onto my laptop. I watched youtube and began to obsess over the squish mellow that Nora and I had taken to the park the day before. We couldn’t find it anywhere before bedtime. I was afraid we'd lost it. Miriam said it was probably in the basement. Nora had been down there playing with Yaya before she came up for bed.

I couldn't tell if this sudden obsession was merely an outburst of my existential dread. Or if my panic was solely due to the whereabouts of the stuffed animal. It may have had something to do with the sentiment I had attached to it. Having bought it for her when I was in Calgary.

I held the image in my mind. Of Nora and I, when we were at the park the day before. Watching her drop the squish mellow into the dirt. I remembered picking it up and dusting it off. I gave it back to her. I put it back in the stroller. I put it in the cup holder. Where the fuck was it.

I spent an hour and half on the internet looking for a replacement. The best I could find was one on eBay for $70. Plus shipping and taxes from the UK. I found another one in the US but for some reason it didn't ship to Canada. Maybe there was someone I knew in the US that could accept it. And ship it out to me.

I prayed that it was in her room. Or that we would go back to the park and it would still be there.

The amount of anguish that I felt. The defeat I felt. The inability to slow my thoughts. Despite how trivial it was. I could not seem to overcome it.

That little squish mellow had become an object that I could project all of my denial onto.

Until an earwig ran across the floor. I stomped it out with my slipper. Its legs twitched along, more and more slowly until they stopped for good.

I heard Nora move around in her crib. I hoped I hadn't woken her. Stomping out that bug.

Maybe I should have let it live.

Miriam came into my office. She told me to come back to bed. I told her I wouldn't be able to sleep. She told me to try. I followed her back to the bedroom. We lay down together. She put her hand on my head. And I slept.

When I woke up the bed was empty except for a Mr. Potato Head arm on my pillow. I coughed and looked out the window. I put on my sweater and my socks and I went out into the hallway. I could hear Miriam and Nora downstairs, making eggs.

I went into my office. The squish mellow was there, on my desk. Smiling up at me. I thought about how I'd felt in the night. In the fit of my anxiety. It seemed like I believed in God at some point, maybe for five or ten minutes. As I prayed for the squish mellow's safe return.

I thought of St. Paul the Hermit. How I had the impression that he had found his faith through discipline and persistence. But maybe it was desperation after all.

I went down to the kitchen, with the squishmellow.

Miriam said that it was in the basement like she'd told me it would be. Nora had left it down there when she was saying goodnight to Yaya.

I sat at the table and drank my coffee.

We went to the playground. Nora climbed onto the slide and splashed her hand in a puddle that had formed in the rain.

When we came home, we put Nora down for her nap. I sat down to read. But for the most part I just left the book face down in my lap. Instead I stared off. Not writing or reading. Just thinking of things. I read over everything I'd written in the morning. Even though I felt like I wasn't getting anything done, there were still some things there. I wandered off and sat on the edge of the bed and flossed my teeth for some reason. I came back and sat at my desk and tried

to edit but I felt like I wasn't able to. I tried to be calm. I tried to breathe and relax my stomach. I pushed my hand into my jaw, trying to relieve my headache.

I tried to write again. To be productive somehow. That was my defence. To continue working. To build my fortress.

But it seemed, no matter how much I worked, day after day, it was never enough. And the moment I stopped, the sadness that had been with me, it all began to flood back, slowly like foam.

I stood looking at the moat. There was not enough tupperware for it all.

I pushed my palm into the back of my head. It seemed that made me feel better, some.

I took a shower. I trimmed my beard. I clipped my fingernails and my toenails.

The house had become quiet. Nora slept in her crib. Miriam worked in the bedroom. I told her I was going to start on dinner.

I stopped on the staircase, on the way downstairs. And looked back at my office. At the notebook on the table.

I went back to it. And I wrote something down again.

* * *

In the morning we set all of Nora's stuffed animals up in a row on the chair downstairs. She laughed when she came and saw them all. She ran to them and threw them off, one by one. She took her lamb in one hand and her elephant in the other and squeezed them as hard as she could.

She dumped her markers out onto the carpet. She drew a pink stripe across the knee of my pants. We raced her toy cars until it was time to go to daycare.

After we dropped her off we went to the coffee shop. Miriam caught up on her work. And I sat with mine. I wanted to edit my book, from the beginning. I sat with the pages and tried to read the words in front of me, but it seemed I had become illiterate.

When we got home I got lunch together while Miriam put Nora down for her nap. I opened the fridge and saw the tupperware, on the shelf. I took it and opened it and went to put it into the microwave. A strange nausea came over me. And I thought to lie down on the couch. And then I was vomiting, with my head in the toilet.

I became so weak through the night. Vomiting every few hours. I lay in bed. Going on youtube and rotting in the bandwidth. Small things would occur to me, to write about. They clouded above me, moving slowly and hanging lopsided and meaningless.

At some point in the night. It was like I was dreaming while I was awake. And I saw that the earth opened into flesh but it was blackness and tooth and follicles, blemished in their human form and blemished in their doorframe. Flicking off the larvae, like snot towards the fireplace. They stick onto the glass. And they burned into little gold stars. There is moth dust on your finger tips. You rub your fingers together until a ball of gunk forms. And you pick the rest from your fingernail, with your other fingernail. And it flares and bursts into more sun and a fiction that surely was, in retrospect, disingenuous, but still, it was the only way that seemed correct to describe the delirium, ordinary and subtle as it was.

Miriam came into the room. She had heard my footsteps creaking from downstairs. She saw I was pacing around the bed in some kind of panic. She cleaned up the blankets and the pillows and got me to go back to bed. She put her hand on my head and she put on a movie for me to watch. She stayed up with me for three or four hours, until I began to calm down.

I slept for a long time. And I stayed in bed for another day. And then I sat on the toilet for some time. I looked into the bowl and saw that perhaps it was not me that was the self loathing piece of shit. That instead, it was that floating black and green thing there, slowly turning in the water.

There it was.

The melancholy.

Finally, it had passed through me.

As I wiped my ass I remembered I had always wanted to write a book and call it Fuck You. I didn't think I would use that title for this book, but the idea had been on my mind for many years. The joy of saying Fuck You, to some vague force out there. To no one in particular, and to everyone at once. The beauty of the phrase, in all its glory.

Fuck You.

I lay at the foot of the couch. Nora stood above me. She stared at me for a moment, before lifting her wooden hammer and smashing it onto my head. She laughed hysterically. I tried not to laugh, as not to encourage her, but I couldn't help it.

She went to her dollhouse, and hit her doll against the railing. She held her race car in her other hand. She walked back over to me and sat on my stomach. She pushed her hand onto my nose, trying to crush it. And then pointed her finger inside of my nostril. She pushed on my nose again, flattening it and laughing. She put her hand on her own nose. And then she put her finger in her own nostril. And then she reached her finger towards my face, and tried to poke out my eye.

I had a vision of sorts then. For the first time in what seemed like a long time, I could envision a real kind of future. That I could endure what was to come. For her.

I thought back to the beginning of my manuscript. Of what I'd read in the coffee shop the week before. How small the narrator of the book seemed to me. A tiny pinprick of light inside a cold mound of unfit flesh. The sad, maudlin child. Rendered helpless by the impression of, or the echo of, my deranged ego. Bloated from malnourishment.

It seemed, upon learning of my Dad's brain cancer. That I'd fallen into the core of that ego. The root of the fracture. Of where it began.

And with each page. With each chapter. To break that ego down. That ego that demanded like a child screaming in the grocery store, for a box of whatever fruit snack it saw during the commercial break of the cartoon. Throwing the boxes off the shelves. Onto the ground. Screaming. The mother walking away. To leave the child there. On his own.

The ego demanded. Like the tantrum addicted child, that he was a writer. That if he did not write then he would die. That if he did not find the success that he imagined, then his entire life was for nothing. That he was a failure. That sitting with his family, if not to be used for material to write about later, that it was a waste of time.

That is how it can feel. The ego, that says — I am nothing but a writer. It is its own kind of cancer. But I must have this box of fruit snacks. And if you don't buy it for me, I will become filled with a vile hate for all that I've been given. And one day when I grow up, I'm going to eat nothing but bullshit and guar gum. And you will see how powerful I will become. I will become as powerful as the mutant hero on the box. And I will not need anyone. I will be respected and revered and I will eat my fruit snacks, and I will write my books, and I will build my fortress. Behind an abscess moat, of congealed tupperware muck. Where I can be a glint, alone in my own reality.

And Nora, then climbed onto my chest as I lay on the carpet. Still weak from the sickness I had. That she probably brought home from the daycare, or from the park. Drool poured from her mouth and landed onto my face. She took the wooden hammer from her toolbox and smashed it onto my head again. And she laughed hysterically. As the world laughed hysterically. As God laughed hysterically. As she bashed the ego from my skull and demanded I become healthy again. And demanded that I get up and walk her across the room and hold her when she screamed, and hold her in the pet store so she could see the birds and the fish and the gerbil and the cat. And she threw the food off her highchair, behind her head, wasting our money, wasting our time. And she bashed the wooden hammer into my skull and laughed, hysterically. And my laughter was unleashed and I was released from who I thought I was. And the joy of it broke me to nothing.

Your father will die, but you will still be mine, she said.

You are not a writer, she said.

Your book is nothing.

You are not you.

You are my Dad alone and nothing else. And I am all of the light there is.

* * *

I sat at my computer, copying some files from one hard drive to another. The little one filled up so now I had to send those files over to the big one.

I tried to write as I waited. I had the sense that I wouldn't come up with anything. But that hopelessness began to take on a form of its own.

As a slab of whale blubber or something like that.

Whale blubber. To imagine a strip of fat washed ashore. Beached on the rocks and the grey sand. The tide moving in and out. The fat had decomposed some. Maybe we would roast it over the fire. To turn it into soup.

But we built our fire too close to the shore. And a wave came and washed it away. So we had to pickle what was left of the charred blubber.

The rocks became bigger as we moved away from the shore. You did not want to carry the blubber on your back. You were more angry than I was about having to do this.

I seemed to know that this needed to be done. But you, you were damp and cold and tired and irritated. The smell of the blubber. Decomposed, charred some. Rotten and raw. It kept slipping from your hands and you saw that the only way to carry it was on your back. To be enveloped in the scent of it. It took what warmth was left in your body.

You carried the miserable thing. Lugging it and having to follow, of all people, me.

We went away from the water. You slipped and hit your head on the rocks. You dropped your end of the blubber. But you did not blame yourself. Instead, you blamed me.

We found a cinderblock for you to sit on. I crouched downward, staring at the blubber. Trying to parse some of it off.

We cannot eat it, I told you.

Why not? You asked.

It isn't whale blubber, I said.

What is it then?

I showed you the grain of it. How it curved in the shape of a massive skull. How it looked more like a tumour. God's tumour. But you knew, I saw that in everything. That I had no idea what I was talking about. You took the blubber for yourself and began to chew its rubbery flesh.

You wrote about our time together. And after you read over what you wrote, you thought that maybe you should write it out again. That you should go over every sentence to rewrite and polish all of it.

I told you that you would probably overwrite the account of our time together. That I worried that you would be too self conscious. That you would try to seem too competent in your writing. That you would worry too much about the final outcome. Instead, I hoped you would write in a way that reflected who you were in a way that was more unobstructed. In a way that was more natural to you.

How infuriating it was, to hear me go on. About how I knew how desperate you were to show the world how much you were worth. About how much time you had spent agonizing over what you had put together. How hard you had worked. That you felt an indescribable drive that you prayed would one day connect you with some kind of authentic image of yourself. That your ambition for success and recognition would align with your obsession in such a way that undoubtedly would conquer all of your opponents. I knew how bloodthirsty you were. And how sometimes you became afraid of how elated you felt. But this idea of grandeur. You knew as well as I did, that was merely another intoxication, merely another illusion, like any other.

Still, I would do my best to read what you came up with. Whatever it was. But I hoped you would remember the rancid fat that we dragged from the shore and how it felt to sit and eat it on that cinder block. Of where we were, on that rocky beach. With the whale blubber that we found. God's tumour having washed up onto the shore.

And when it seemed like you had had enough. That your stomach was full. I opened the plastic container I had. And I asked you if I could have what was leftover, to save it for later. But you showed me, that there was nothing left. That you had finished it all.

After the files finished transferring I walked with Nora, to the playground. We went down the slide with together. And I thought of you again. Of what it was like to live a life that you could not leave. That most of us, in some way, lived a life that we could not leave.

I suppose all we could do, was to imagine a place that was beyond that. Beyond our boredom, our malcontent, perhaps. If that's what it was. And for me, it seemed the place I imagined, was a damp and cold horizon. Because I did not live near the ocean. And for that

reason, I felt irrelevant. And incomplete. Instead, I lived near the Great Lakes. And while they did eventually connect to the Atlantic, they were not the ocean that I knew.

I know how much you hated it there. On that beach I'd imagined us on. I know how badly you'd wished you'd stayed at home. Instead of having to carry that enormous slab of whale blubber up the rocks. With me. How frustrating it was. To have to do things my way. But still, I think you knew how grateful I was, to have you there.

* * *

Miriam had gotten me to book an appointment with my doctor, since I'd been getting sick so often. The appointment was online. I explained to my doctor, everything that had been going on through the lagging pixelated screen. She ordered me a blood test. And she made me an appointment for me to talk to the resident psychiatrist the following day.

In the afternoon I went to the garage. To clean out some things I'd brought home from my old storage unit. I'd thrown most everything in the trash. But there was always more to get rid of. A few things were worth keeping. A wooden yoyo my Mom gave me when I was a kid. A few good pens.

I found a box full of writing that I'd done. Some things I'd written almost 20 years ago. Stories, journals, screenplays from all my years of trying.

And without thinking much, I threw it all in the dumpster.

I went back inside. I sat in my office. By the window. And I was tempted, somewhat, to go and fish all of that writing back out. I imagined all of those hours, days, months, years, decades, all in the trash.

After we dropped Nora off, I told Miriam I was going to go work in the garage for a bit. I didn't tell her that I'd found all of that writing. Let alone thrown it all out.

I opened the trash bin.

All of the rainwater from the lid dripped down onto the fence.

I found a screenplay I'd written when Miriam and I first started dating. I tossed it back into the garage. There was a three hundred page book of short stories that I hoped never to read over again. The pages somehow had stayed intact.

The neighbour came out of her house and began packing her kids into their car.

I said good morning and then realized it wasn't morning.

She'd seen me earlier, throwing all of that shit out and now there I was fishing it all back out again.

I wondered how strange she thought I was. Digging through the bin like that.

If only she knew it was almost all of the writing I'd ever done. Literally my life's work. The only record of it all. Thrown into the trash.

I dug out the rest of the stacks of paper that were there. Undamaged for the most part. The rain hadn't destroyed them like I had kind of hoped it would have.

And then I organized all of pages into a box that I hoped no one would ever find and that I would never open again.

I went back in to get my jacket and then I walked over to the pharmacy to get my blood taken. I played chess on my phone while I waited for them to call my name.

I went into the booth. The nurse told me to make a fist. I became afraid. But then thought of Nora. Of watching the needle that pierced into her skin when we'd taken her to her last checkup. The nurse stabbed the needle into my arm and it felt like nothing.

I looked at my phone on the way out of the pharmacy. I'd missed a call from my Dad.

I called him back. He said he'd dialled me by accident. But we still talked for a few minutes. I told him that Nora kept saying the names of fruits and vegetables when we were at the grocery store the night before. Onion, lemon, apple.

He told me he was getting ready to start his sixth round of chemotherapy. And that his most recent MRI showed that the tumour had grown some. But that the growth was not very significant.

He told me about a curling shot he'd made the year before. The guy on his team said that he couldn't do it. That it was impossible.

Watch me, my Dad said.

And he made the shot with ease.

He described the way the rock snuck between two others and cracked against another and slowed down right to where he said it would. He laughed on the phone when he told me about it.

I suppose the truth of it was, what I couldn't say out loud, is that he would likely never curl again. So to hear him laugh, as he thought of that memory. It was good.

Despite the death sentence he'd received. He was okay. He still lived each day. In all its mundane and ordinary glory. Every time I spoke to him. He would tell me, proudly, how many steps he took in the day. Usually mixing up the denominations. Saying eight million when he meant eight thousand. Sometimes he would have to sound out the number. One, zero, zero, seven, two. 10,072. He'd been walking from the house to the coffee shop most days. Going all over the neighbourhood, looking at the construction sites. He walked with his brother, sometimes with my Mom. And sometimes he walked on his own. It seemed that was enough for him. I could see how his speech was degrading. It was happening very slowly. It seemed like his thoughts were more disconnected some days than others. But with some help, he could usually find a way to get to the point of what he was trying to. Some days he didn't sleep well. And he would tell me he was tired. He said it was because he got to thinking about things. What he meant by that, what he could not say, was that he got to thinking about not being here anymore. And that the world would go on without him. That he would not be there to watch over us. That he would have to say goodbye to us. And I think, most of all, that he would have to be away from my Mom.

When I got home I went back to the garage to keep sorting through everything I'd brought out from storage. I went through all the books I had. Setting aside the ones I would get rid of.

I found an old e-reader I'd forgot I had. I think I'd won it at an event a long time ago. I couldn't remember exactly.

I took it inside and looked up the model. It was about 13 years old. I found a plug that worked with it and connected it to my computer. A little blue light came on and then after a minute or so, the screen went white and a cartoon of a book with a happy face appeared. It moved very slowly, but it still worked. There were all kinds of books on it. And it seemed like for the most part, my taste in books hadn't changed very much in the last decade.

I couldn't get the reader to come up on my computer, to put any new books on. Maybe the cable was no good. I dug through the nest of wires I had in my desk. I found another one that fit, but it didn't work either.

I asked Miriam what old cables she had. She came into my office with a bunch of them tangled in her fingers, but none of them were quite what I needed.

I went down the rabbit hole, clicking through all kinds of youtube videos, trying to figure out how to make it work. But it seemed like there was no way to add any more books. I could just read what was on there already. Still, I messed with it for another hour and a half or so. I began to feel frustrated by how much time I'd wasted trying to figure it out. But I couldn't get over the need I felt to overcome it.

I turned off the e-reader and began looking at the newer models on the website. You could connect them to the library app. I got lost in the allure of that. Being able to read ebooks from the library on this little machine. I found a refurbished model on their website. It cost $40 less than a new one would. Free shipping. I clicked add to cart and then I got frustrated again that I'd wasted the rest of the day on this stupid thing, and that I hadn't written anything. I closed my computer and went downstairs.

* * *

I was early for my doctor's appointment. So I went to the McDonald's up the street. The woman working the till wore a purple hat with a cartoon face on it. I stared at it for a moment, feeling its familiarity until finally, I realized it was Grimace.

I had gone in to that McDonald's on autopilot. It was across the street from the film school I used to teach at. I used to enjoy sitting there when I was early for my lectures. I remembered that time in our lives, only a year before, when Miriam was pregnant. Those weeks when we were past her due date. Waiting for Nora to arrive.

I sat with my coffee and watched the janitor through the window of the school. She pushed her cart to the other side of the room and began dusting the ledges. I'd never learned her name but we used to say hello when we passed each other in the hallway there.

I sat with my coffee in the waiting room of the psychiatrist's office. I was anxious that I wouldn't be able to properly explain how things had been for me. That he would think I was exaggerating. That he would see me as a whining and spoiled coward.

He appeared and read my name off of his clipboard. He led me into a room. I sat in the chair and he began asking the questions he needed to. I felt a certain relief that he took me seriously. And I suppose, a certain kind of pride as well. I ended up talking to him for two hours.

He told me that a depression and anxiety diagnosis were a given. He said that a certain amount of autism was likely at play. He said potentially bipolar, potentially borderline

personality disorder. But more than anything he seemed to focus on a chronic form of depression called Dysthymia.

He showed me a mood tracker that I could download onto my phone. In the coming weeks I was to log the severity or lack thereof, my depression, elation, irritability and anxiety.

He talked to me about some medications to consider. He said that medication wouldn't solve my problems overnight. But that it could help. He said to think of them as something that could get me 25% of the way there.

Nine and half years sober.

I wasn't sure if taking these kinds of meds. If in my mind that would be breaking my sobriety or not.

There was a side of me that felt like I would be giving up on myself. And I was frightened by the idea of it all. But I thought of how it could help Miriam. And how it could help Nora.

At the end of the appointment, I asked the psychiatrist if he would give me his honest advice as to what he thought I should do.

A drug called Wellbutrin. If I felt ready for that.

He booked me in for a follow up appointment for the first week of December.

When we said goodbye I think he could see how grateful I was for our meeting.

When I got home Miriam was making dinner. There was a loaf of sourdough bread on the counter. Miriam said Yaya's friend gave it to us.

She said that if I was going to go on meds, she wanted me to do it for me, not for her or for Nora.

For some reason, I couldn't seem to understand that. What it meant to do it for me.

But when I thought of going down the road with it, and trying the meds for Nora's sake, it made sense.

I opened the fridge, somewhat mindlessly.

I threw out a bunch of stuff, Miriam said. She took her dish gloves off and set them onto the hook. The tupperware was there, grease stained and wet, leaning on the drying rack.

I went upstairs and sat down to write. But I found it difficult. I was very tired from the day.

All that came to me was a question that I typed into the internet —

Can you go on an e-reader while on Wellbutrin?

After a while I went downstairs and took some of the sourdough bread that was there. I sat and ate it and wondered what it would take to always have a fresh loaf of this bread on the counter. I had that sense that I could not live my life without it. It was the same side of me that worried most about getting on any kind of medication. That if it actually worked, I would become dependent on it. And to depend on something. Bread. Drugs. People. That would become difficult.

I feared the result of the medication. That if it did help stabilize things, that I wouldn't be able to write. That I would disappear. That I would be abandoning myself. And that I would be giving up on myself.

But to keep going in the way that I had been. To be this kind of burden to my wife and to my daughter. All of the sadness and anger and anxiety. They deserved more than that.

Nora's daycare sent an e-mail with their monthly newsletter. There was a picture of her. She touched a honey stick against a wooden apple for Rosh Hashanah. There was another picture, she sat on the bench outside with the other kids, holding a plastic shovel.

I returned to the thought again. Of going down the road with this medication. How it felt like I would be sacrificing myself.

But to move towards that fear. To let go of whatever I thought I was holding on to, and to try and get better for her.

I thought again about how Miriam said that I should do it for me. But I didn't know how to do it for me.

My way would be to do what I always had. To dig my heels in and keep trying to force my way through. Spending an hour and a half. Two hours. Plugging the same cord in and out of the e-reader socket, thinking I could somehow figure it out.

I needed to do it for Miriam. I needed to do it for Nora.

To have them, a daughter and a wife. And all that came with it.

I didn’t always have that. And I could see the reality, how one day, if I couldn't find a way out from what this was. How it could all disappear.

# V

## DEATH AND RESURRECTION

But still you were there.

In your human body.

Your blood. And phlegm. The yellow bile and the black bile.

Humors, they called them. A balanced weight of these was health. And disease came when they fell out of order, when one was deficient or in excess, or became separated, no longer mixed inside the body. Each was to be present in the correct quantity and strength.

A product of digestion, formed in the stomach, food became chylous, a milk fluid absorbed by the liver. To transform and to enter the bloodstream. As things went along, any flaw, any discrepancy or irregularity, if the stomach or liver failed, if the chylous was poor, the humors would be corrupted. And so would the body.

A good humor could not be made from bad chylous. The chain had to begin well to end well. Disease was imbalance, a misstep in digestion.

A city exposed to hot wind was plagued with digestive trouble. Phlegm pouring down from the head. Cold wind brought lung disease. Acute fever, hardened bowels, and frequent nosebleeds.

Other cities bred pale, sickly people. Frail, marked by every form of illness.

To purge the excess. Treatments aimed to restore balance. To induce vomiting and bowel movements.

Bloodletting. Drawn and left to settle. The four layers would emerge.

A layer of red cells, the blood. Warm, sociable and lively. Laughing easily. Rosy skin. Enthusiastic, energetic and social. Optimistic. Spring, warmth.

Phlegm dulled the spirit. Forgetful and slow. A dull passion. Mucus and all pale secretions. Saliva, sweat and pus. Reserved and inward. Calmness and sluggishness.

Yellow bile. Irritable and ambitious. A temperament. Aggression, decisiveness, volatility. Found in bile, vomit and faeces. Summer, fire. An excess of anger, irrationality.

And at the bottom, a dark clot — black bile. Sluggish, anxious, with dark features and a shadowed soul. Depression and even cancer were attributed to overproduction. Cold and dry, like autumn. Reflective of man's darker seasons. Introspection and sadness. Melancholy.

And the harmonious culmination of these humors. A fifth fluid produced by perfect digestion and internal balance. A unique, almost sacred role as the carrier of essence and of lineage and of spirit. A distillation of a distillation. Cum, Semen.

Abram then was ninety nine years old, and God appeared to Abram, and he said to him, I am the almighty God, walk before me and be perfect.

And I will place my covenant between me and between you, and I will multiply you very greatly.

And Abram fell upon his face, and God spoke with him, saying, as for me behold my covenant is with you, and you shall become the father of a multitude of nations.

And your name shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings will emerge from you.

And I will establish my covenant between me and between you and between your seed after you throughout their generations as an everlasting covenant, to be to you for a God and to your seed after you.

And I will give you and your seed after you the land of your sojourning, the entire land of Canaan for an everlasting possession, and I will be to them a God.

And God said to Abraham, and you shall keep my covenant, you and your seed after you throughout their generations.

This is my covenant, which you shall observe between me and between you and between your seed after you, that every male among you be circumcised.

And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be as the sign of a covenant between me and between you.

And at the age of eight days, every male shall be circumcised to you throughout your generations, one that is born in the house, or one that is purchased with money, from any foreigner, who is not of your seed.

Those born in the house and those purchased for money shall be circumcised, and my covenant shall be in your flesh as an everlasting covenant.

And an uncircumcised male, who will not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that soul will be cut off from its people, he has broken my covenant.

And God said to Abraham, your wife Sarai, you shall not call her name Sarai, for Sarah is her name.

And I will bless her, and I will give you a son from her, and I will bless her, and she will become a mother of nations. Kings of nations will be from her.

And Abraham fell on his face and rejoiced and he said to himself, will a child be born to one who is a hundred years old, and will Sarah, who is ninety years old, give birth?

And Abraham said to God if only Ishmael will live before you.

And God said, indeed your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac and I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his seed after him.

And regarding Ishmael, I have heard you behold I have blessed him and I will make him fruitful and I will multiply him exceedingly. He will beget twelve princes and I will make him into a great nation.

But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this time next year.

And he finished speaking with him, and God went up from above Abraham.

And Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house and all those purchased with his money, every male of the people of Abraham's household, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskin on that very day, as God had spoken with him.

And Abraham was ninety nine years old, when he was circumcised of the flesh of his foreskin.

And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old, when he was circumcised of the flesh of his foreskin.

On that very day, Abraham was circumcised and Ishmael his son.

And all the people of this household, those born in his house and those bought with money from foreigners, were circumcised with him.

And so, some five thousand years pass.

And there was a bris. Near the Pacific coastline. Vancouver. A friend from another life. His son, already eight days old. A link on the internet.

I clicked on it. And opened the window. A tapestry of a tree. And a star of David in stained glass behind it.

There was no one at the bima. I extended the window and the benches were all empty and it seemed there was no one there. Only a gooseneck microphone on the ground. Its cord snaked along the carpet and to the wall.

Clicking through the video that had since elapsed. Two hours. The movement of the light clotted into a still frame.

Until a man appeared and he stood at the foot of the bima and he looked at his cell phone. Eventually reaching towards a book on the table next to him. He pushed it a few inches. And then he left.

I shrunk the window and moved it to the corner of the screen and tried to write some.

Fifteen minutes or so passed. And the man returned. And he stood with his back to the camera. And he went onto his phone for another few minutes. And then he left the frame again.

I was satisfied, in the plainness of the idiocy. Sitting alone in my office, watching an empty synagogue on the other side of the country.

I walked to the kitchen, each step taking one hour, and one week and one month. Until some time had passed. And I took an apple from the fridge and cut it into slices.

Sitting across from my Dad. When I was in Calgary last. He had asked me why I cut the apple into slices like I did. Why didn't I eat the whole thing.

I thought for a moment. That was how Mom had done it for me when I was a kid, I told him. And he nodded. And said that he always ate the whole thing.

The skin of the apple. And the flesh of the apple. And the core of the apple.

The light is angled from the mantle and the air is no longer air. There is no soul, only a sluggish liquid. Perpetually forcing it up the hill. There is filth and sludge battering down. And the wind does not let up, not for a moment. There are trees there, engulfed in flames, but they do not burn. And the trees go on endlessly. But you cannot see them.

In your indifference it is hell that you eat. You ate it whole and you were unafraid. Because God did not exist to you, atheist. You looked clearly into the abyss that was there and you said that God did not exist.

And I remembered, being in the car with my Mom.

My sister in the front seat next to her. Perhaps looking out the window, at the horses in the field. There were horses there. It is impossible to imagine now that there were horses there. Standing in the field, around the traffic. It seems like a dream but there were horses there.

She told us about her father. And she explained that he had passed away, when we were too young to remember.

And that even though he was gone. He was still with us. This was a contradiction that I understood to be true.

To cut the apple into slices. To eat it whole.

I sat down at the computer again. The lighting in the synagogue changed and the pixels became square and faded and lagged into one another. The same sun through the window where I was. Seeing it from the screen and from the window.

And walking through the neighbourhood. My head hunched downward, scrolling through the library app again. Distracted by a noise and looking upward, to see where it came from. A construction site.

And I noticed oddly, that I was walking with what seemed like an ironclad erection.

And as I glanced behind myself to admire the horizon that its shadow cast, I happened to walk too close to a table saw. And was subsequently castrated.

Writhing on the pavement, screaming in agony. It seemed I had reached the ending.

And finally, at the age of 37, I died.

* * *

As I understood. There was an idea in your head. That after we are gone, that we are still here in some way.

I can confirm, that there is nothing. Except for the love you had. It fades off, like vapour. But remains, in the way that it does. It seems the body, in the end is the ephemeral part.

An eternity passed, momentarily.

And then I came to. In a total absence of everything. It seemed, finally, I was nowhere.

And I thought of the edit of this book. How maybe I'd deleted too much. How the reality was, it seemed, that I had deleted myself.

And there was my body. Upward like buoyant mud. I felt I was in a wooden tower, that I was very high up. But then I realized it was the opposite. I was buried, perhaps, inside of a wooden box. And I thought about writing a new introduction. Or maybe a preface. And I realized I did not know what the difference between the two was.

As I imagined this preface, and this introduction, of who it would be for, exactly. I considered, a group of faceless heads. Sitting like worms in the dark. A light glowing from a stone tablet onto their faces.

It seemed their world had become ordinary. That they had become impaired, like us, in their ability to see what was in front of them.

And it seemed there must be some element of bullshit. Of sacred bullshit. Some version of the truth. Or a truth so blatant that surely it must be a lie.

JOSHUA HILLEL BARSKY

BLEOVED FATHER, HUSBAND & SON

1987 - 2024

Bleoved. How did nobody catch that?

There were a few small rocks set there. On the tombstone. I wondered who had put them there. How much time had passed. How much my daughter had grown.

It was quiet still, in the graveyard. The sun was bright behind the clouds.

I liked the suit I was dressed in. At first I thought it was black, and covered in dirt. But after I dusted myself off, I realized it was a dark brown suit, much like the colour of dirt.

I recognized where I was. Not very far from the house. It was the same graveyard we'd gotten lost in on one of our walks together, however long ago. After we'd gone to Burger Shack that one time. I remembered the family who was camped out with their minivan and their cooler.

I stopped for a coffee at the Tim Horton's in the gas station. Standing outside, watching the traffic. All of the cars going back and forth. All of these protagonists, self actualizing their way to past infinity.

Perhaps I would need another bris myself, I thought. Having so senselessly died and been so senselessly resurrected. But recalling the origin of my death, I did not know what would be necessary or appropriate.

This new version of myself. It seemed I felt less of a neurosis. And more of a persistent and vile agitation. As I walked home. Back to my desk, I was surprised to see my computer remained open. A computer that would never shut off. The live stream bris glowing still, faint in the daylight.

The synagogue remained as empty as it was. The tapestry still there, dust fading onto the bima. The book still an inch past from where it had been. The gooseneck microphone now,

tipped over onto its side. Its cord curved into a kind of mirrored serpent and closer to the wall than it was.

There could be no beginning, it seemed, until the ending had been drawn.

I had no sense as to why I'd been resurrected. It meant nothing to me, to know why. I didn't care. Instead, I was distracted by youtube and watched movie trailers. And for the most part, I was irritated by them. In all of their structure and all their form. In all of their beginnings and all of their endings.

And it became time to pick Nora up from daycare again.

I went to get her room ready. Organizing her stuffed animals and her books. I laid out her pyjamas. And closed the blinds.

Pushing her stroller down the sidewalk. I thought about the medication again. Imagining myself being more present, like the other Dad's in the park. It appeared that perhaps I needed to be drugged, to live in their world.

Sacrificing my disgruntled and misanthropic ego. Letting go of this frivolous attempt at healing my inherent flaws. Letting it die in the dirt.

At the daycare. I watched Nora and the other kids through the window. They were listening to the sleeping bunnies song. It played loud. I couldn't tell if they heard my knock or not.

There was a man at the other end of the hallway. His daughter a year or so older than mine.

He told her to wait. But she would not wait. And she ran down the hallway away from him.

How angry he became, telling her quietly, that if she didn't listen that they would not play the game at all. Because right now, it was not yet time to play the game.

Did she understand, he asked. And she stared up at him.

And said nothing. And instead, she waited until he thought she did and then in that very moment, she ran off again. And he became even angrier.

She ran down the hall, disappearing around the corner.

And his rage began to boil and he asked her why she ran away again, after he had told her not to.

But she did not respond. Because the answer was so obscenely rhetorical. He was supposed to chase her. So that she would scream with laughter.

But he did not. Instead he told her how serious he was. And she looked up at him. At his inglorious face.

But she would test his sincerity, because she did not believe it to be true. And so she ran again, down the hall. But he did not follow. And when she came back there was a fury and hatred that burned in his eyes and he told her again that it was not yet time.

But she persisted, running back again and again. She would gladly shit in his hand and kick him in the nuts and scream in his face and steal all the love that he had.

It was her duty to break him. And finally she did. And when he ran after her she screamed with laughter. And he did too.

His daughter, like mine, she was all that he was worth. Without her, he was nothing.

* * *

Another appointment with the doctor.

Following up on the psychiatrist's report. I had become increasingly superstitious, weary of the synchronicity of the timing, it landing on the eve of the Jewish New Year. But I appreciated the superstition, in a way. As it showed the holes in my atheism.

The doctor's demeanour seemed more gentle than before. It seemed I had become delicate to her, that I had become weak.

We went through the psychiatrist's report that she had. I asked her to send it to me and she did. After a few pages of him outlining everything we'd talked about in our meeting, he gave his formal diagnosis as to what he thought was going on.

*Overall the main diagnosis seem to be persistent depression and anxiety, with some degree of emotional dysregulation, perhaps indicative of an underlying bipolar diathesis given a positive family history, though unclear whether the threshold of hypomania has been met.*

*We considered whether an overarching diagnosis of a personality disorder and/or ASD could better capture his experience. He describes a constellation of symptoms suggestive of BPD. While he does not meet criteria for BPD at present, I wonder whether residual symptoms could help to explain emotional dysregulation. We discussed starting with a trial of Wellbutrin XL to address depression, as well as anxiety and ADHD symptoms. Start at 150 mg for 4 weeks, increase to 300-450 mg as needed. We discussed monitoring for the emergence of hypomanic/ manic symptoms and/or a worsening in anxious symptoms.*

*Dx. Persistent Depressive Disorder. Generalized Anxiety Disorder. polysubstance use d/o (in sustained remission), cluster B traits, ADHD (by history) r/o ASD r/o bipolar II d/o.*

I went on my phone and typed in — persistent depressive disorder.

In the DSM-IV it was called Dysthymia. For some reason in the DSM-V they changed the name to Persistent Depressive Disorder. But to me, it was all good old faithful depression at the end of the day.

We went to dinner at Miriam's cousin's house. For Rosh Hashanah. I sat beside Nora for most of the meal, feeding her matzoh ball soup and whatever else.

I didn't feel the need to talk much or do anything but fade into the background. I became a floating spoon. Anxious to get us out of there so I could make it to the pharmacy before it closed.

I parked on the street and ran in and put my health card on the counter. The pharmacist took it and looked at it and typed something into her computer. She walked away and came back with a paper bag.

Have you taken these before? She asked.

No, I said.

Do you have any questions?

No.

I paid for the prescription and ran back to the car and drove home. And in the morning I went into my office and opened the paper bag. The pill bottle was a kind of neon blue colour. It read like its own kind of tombstone.

BARSKY, JOSHUA HILLEL

TAKE 1 TABLET ONCE DAILY

WELLBUTRIN XL 150 mg

BUPROPION HCL

Under the cap. A mound of little white circles. Each with a tiny pink inscription. WXL 150.

I sat in my chair. And I put a pill into my mouth and I drank a sip of water.

* * *

The sun was white outside the window. It was morning. The power lines were there.

The first day of the new year. 5786.

I sat and waited. I felt ordinary. But artificially so.

My thoughts began to wander back to where they normally did. About how I might repair the beginning of my book. About how I needed to edit.

I sat and drank coffee and wasted the next hour on youtube.

Eventually I felt a buzzing in my head. Maybe like someone had taken all of the circuits in my brain and rewired them through the front sockets behind my forehead. And it was like I was

charging in the wall socket. Like I was already at one hundred, but still senselessly charging. When I closed my eyes the light from the laptop was bright on my eyelid. More so than the light from the window.

I had become a power line, swaying aimlessly. A squirrel ran across my spine. And hopped off, as well aimlessly.

Downstairs. Nora walked dizzily around the living room. Wearing an upside down dog cone on her head. She laughed and ran towards me, half infant half lamp.

It seemed appropriate somehow, that maybe I should wear the dog cone around my neck, to synagogue.

I lifted her up and spun her around and she threw the dog cone downstairs. I sat her down beside me on the couch and I asked her about the year that had passed. How it had gone for her.

But she had no interest in talking.

Instead she crashed her head onto the pillow beside us and slid off the couch on her stomach and ran off to get her bunny car toy.

Out the window. A row of white pylons led from the street onto the sidewalk and towards the end of it. Going along. The sun, and the concrete. Parking the car and walking with our stroller and our diaper bag.

We went to the back of the synagogue. Nora sat on my lap. Looking around the room, at all of the people around us. Maybe for about ten seconds before yanking the bow out of her hair and throwing it onto the ground and crawling over to Miriam.

They would go to the kid's area. But I would stay, to be around the service. Watching them disappear around the corner.

I stood when we were meant to stand and sat when we were meant to sit. And said amen, sometimes, when we were supposed to say amen and I followed along in the book. Sometimes taking things in, sometimes being distracted by the congregation around me. This was hell to me, growing up. But now, I was there.

The texture of this kind of place. The tone of it. The more effort I put into not giving a shit, the more I saw how I was inseparable from it.

And there was a moment or two, when I stood around, that something inside of my chest would swell and move upwards to my skull, and some water would collect in my eyelids. I thought of that, against the medication. Trying to gauge if it was still there. Or if the medication had eviscerated it, like a pesticide degrading the soil.

I looked at the other people's outfits and thought about getting a new suit. I wanted a dark brown one, like the one I'd been buried in when I died.

And in the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion. You shall not work at your occupations.

You shall observe it as the day when the horn is sounded.

You shall present a burnt offering, a pleasing odour to Adonai. One bull of the herd, one ram, and seven yearling lambs, without blemish. The grain offering with them, choice flour with oil mixed in, shall be three-tenths of a measure from a bowl, two-tenths for a ram, and one-tenth for each of seven lambs.

And there shall be one goat for a purification offering, to make expedition in your behalf. In addition to the burnt offering of the new moon, with its meal offering, and the regular burnt offering, with its grain offering, each with its libation as prescribed, gifts of pleasing odour to Adonai.

I did not know where I would find a bull or a ram or seven yearling lambs or a goat. But I could probably get the grain offering together. With the choice flour and the oil mixed in.

5000 years ago, or whenever this was written, it seemed like people needed this kind of instruction, as to what to sacrifice to God.

But today it meant nothing. Instead the modern equivalent, maybe, was a standard prescription, provided by the Canadian health care system. 150 milligrams of XL Wellbutrin. One tablet taken daily. To be refilled again, after ninety days.

There was no need to sacrifice any animal. Instead the sacrifice was something different. It was more like a part of the self. And so, I climbed onto the altar, and I sat.

And the Rabbi spoke. With a kind of clarity that made little to no sense at all. And the shofar blasted through the auditorium. Echoing upward, into the rafters.

And you thought of how it was, only a few days before, sitting alone in your office, watching a live stream of a bris on the other side of the country. That no one attended, not even the baby himself. And still you were there.

As you understood, the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were meant to be amongst the holiest of the year. You were meant to reflect on what you had done. To seek forgiveness and to make amends. To set an intention to live a more righteous life.

A more righteous life.

You tried to imagine what that meant. And who it was for. And it seemed that it was not meant for you. It seemed that it was meant for someone else.

The Days of Repentance. The Days of Awe.

As they passed, the buzzing at the front of your head began to break into a soreness that surrounded your skull. And when you sat to write you felt you had nothing to draw from. Like you'd become an artificial sweetener. Or that you had the personality of a soap sud. Or of plastic wrap. And when you slept you felt that your brain could not rest. You were exhausted by your dreams. As they seemed to go on infinitely. Relentless in how meaningless they'd become.

And still, you were there.

Your limbs collapsed, folded on the floor. Without skin or blood. Without bones. You had become postureless, flaccid, airless. Caught at the end of the dam wall. The water pushing against your flesh and bloating into gelatine. Angled towards a vague horizon of some random God's design.

And still you were there. Your blood. And phlegm. The yellow bile and the black bile, all now a weak pus, dissipated in the water.

And you remembered your voice. How afraid you were, to sing to your daughter. When she was so small. To console her. But you found a way. And your voice would quiver along with her cry. And it echoed into the vent. Renewed into something like amber.

And together you were there.

* * *

We parked in front of the Value Village. Miriam went in before us. To pick some new clothes for Nora. Things with long sleeves. Warmer pants for the fall.

I took Nora in her stroller, walking across the parking lot to the McDonald's. We talked about the sky and the clouds and how the air was getting colder each day.

There was a man and a woman ahead of us in the line. They were the first humans, perhaps. They waved and smiled at Nora. She didn't react. Instead, she just stared back at them. Her mouth agape and drool collecting onto her chin. We listened to their order. A happy meal, with no burger or fries or drink or toy. Only the apple slices, the woman said. And the man said nothing. He only took his credit card and touched it to the machine in front of them. Whatever she wanted was fine.

The menu screen above the till flashed and showed a bright pink animation. Nora looked up at it and then saw a line of balloons that were pinned above the deep fryer. She pointed to them and shouted, Balloo! Balloo!

The woman at the register loaded a new roll of receipt paper into the machine.

When I'd been at the other McDonald's before my psychiatry appointment the other week, I'd ordered a medium coffee, but it was too big, so I thought I would order a small one this time. But still I was conflicted by the giant ad on the screen that showed that the monopoly stickers

only came with a medium size or larger. And the medium was only 25 cents more than the small. So I ordered the medium again.

I walked Nora to a booth and sat her next to me. I took the lid off of the coffee. She watched the steam going upward.

Dada drink, she said.

It's hot Nora. It's hot, I said.

Hot. Hot, she repeated. And blew on the steam.

We sat for a bit. Nora stared at the people around us. She pulled herself onto the table and started climbing around the booth. I took the coffee off of the table and put the lid back on so it wouldn't spill. I put her back in the stroller and on our way out a guy stepped ahead of us to hold open the door. I thanked him.

Have a wonderful day, he said.

You too, I said.

He'd made a decent point. Without the heaviness I was used to. I didn't have an immediate argument against what he said like I ordinarily did. Still, I could feel my ego. Or my fear. Or whatever it was. How it reached out to find some sadness or aversion, but it wasn't there on the shelf where it usually was.

Nora was content in her stroller, looking up at the sky as we crossed back through the parking lot. I peeled the monopoly stickers off the cup. They seemed like average places on the

board. But you needed to download an app to do anything with them. So I threw them in the trash.

Let's go find Mama, I said to Nora. As the automatic doors burst open.

Mama. Mama, Nora repeated, excitedly kicking her legs from the stroller.

She reached her hand out to touch the fabrics of the clothes as we passed them. And then we found Miriam at the back of the store, digging through a pile of onesies and jumpers. I unclipped Nora from her chair. And she jumped out and laughed and ran towards her Mom.

Some days passed.

Without repentance or awe.

I sat in my chair, feeling like I'd become painted into the wall behind me. I didn't know how to move forwards, from where I was. I still wrote, but everything I came up with seemed egredioulsly coherent. Long ephemeral paragraphs. Stacks of rice cakes.

Magnesium Bisglycinate, the psychiatrist had suggested. It might help with the anxiety, he said leaning back into his chair.

Steam poured upward as he took the lid off of his cup, somehow his hand slipped. And burning coffee spilled all over his hand. He frowned for a moment before he screamed and then he began to cry.

But I did not flinch. Instead, I watched him weep. Amused slightly, by the absurdity of it.

But you stood immediately, and you passed him all the napkins that you had. And he promised that he would get you more napkins, but you said it was okay.

And he was so grateful to you. And despite what you said, he went to the counter to get more napkins for you. You thanked him and assured him that it was okay.

He sat and ate the crumbs of his muffin and then he began to talk to you again. About how he could not connect his phone to the internet. He asked to borrow a pen, and he wrote something down on a piece of paper, and he asked you again why he could not get onto the internet. Eventually, he had pestered you enough that you told him you could not help him, that you were trying to work. He apologized profusely, but began to talk to you again about his stone tablet at home and how well it worked. How it could connect to something that transcended everything that there ever was. You ignored him, but he continued to stare at you. And then he began to stare at me.

I sit amongst you, psychopath.

I sit amongst the homeless and the degenerates and the gaggles of teenage girls who swarm in on their lunch breaks, with their matching sweatpants and their puffer jackets.

I sit amongst you, psychopath.

Amongst you and these invalids, year after year. We are twin mites crossing the grout, from one tile to the next.

You stared at me, your legs swinging back and forth off the chair like a child. You sipped your coffee and muttered senselessly. Your imaginary audience, incoherent, disparate and splattered randomly around the world like bird shit. You know we are not so different, are we, psychopath? Perhaps it is their world that is broken, after all.

Your eyes began to flutter. You leaned your aching head, your hand touching the pain. I disappeared into my computer and my body became invisible aside from a reflective sheen that surrounded my figure.

You stood finally and carefully pushed your chair back under the table. You walked hunched over towards the door. Staring at the doormat, adjusting your mask. You watched a man as he drilled into the door. You waited for him to finish. You covered your ears with your hat. Your bag hung from your wrist. The man with the drill tells you, politely, that you can go. And so you fix your hat again over your ears and you walk courageously away from where we were. And you see an empty can on the road. Ginger ale. You pick it up and put it into the recycling bin.

And finally then I remembered, where I knew you from. The afternoon when the teacher left the room. You took an orange from your desk and you threw it as hard as you could at the door behind her. I remember how perfectly it exploded against the wall and I remember how hard I laughed. But you did not laugh at all. It was an expression of your rage. Your family had moved here to our country after the Soviet Union collapsed. You did not know our language, but I remember how quickly you learned. You told me about all that you'd left behind, how much better it was where you came from. And now you were stuck here with us.

I liked you more than the other kids. You were more yourself than they were. And so we became friends. You told me your dad was a computer programmer. You told me about all the video games he made for you back home. You told me that if we came up with an idea for a video game that he could make it for us. And I was awestruck by the possibility. We began to

invent our game. But the more we got into it, the more clear it became that it was not going to happen, that your dad could not actually make our game.

One afternoon, I remember we snuck out of class, and then we began to beat the shit out of each other, I don't remember why. You were much bigger than I was, and it seemed there was nothing I could do to hurt you. You threw me into the water fountain. I remember how the spout felt against my spine. I lay there on the carpet, looking up at the pipes, noticing how the water had calcified around the metal.

You were a worthy nemesis. And know that despite how irritated I am by my sentimental nature, that I'm still writing our game. And know that I laugh still, when I think of the way that orange exploded when you threw it against the wall.

A more righteous life, you said.

A more righteous life.

And I laugh still. As the omniscient villain who gayly awaits the pound of flesh we agreed upon. And I ask you again now, for that pound of flesh.

Our days of Repentance, and our days of Awe. They would culminate finally on Yom Kippur. The Day of Atonement.

The holiest day of the year. When God would decide what each person's fate would be.

Miriam was going to fast. She hadn't the year before, when she was breastfeeding. But this year she would. It meant something to her. Maybe for no other reason than it was what her mother raised her to do.

The fast, as I understood, was meant to replace animal sacrifice. It was meant to diminish our fat and our blood, like the fat and the blood that was meant to burn at the altar.

To look closely at a person's religious beliefs. It would be foolish not to expect to find some imperfection. Some hypocrisy. It cannot make perfect sense.

There must be some kind of contradiction, some kind of discrepancy and doubt. That is how the space is made, to believe in something beyond ourselves. It seems that some leap is required in order for faith to exist. A suspension of disbelief is necessary in order to transcend the obvious.

A refusal to engage with these kinds of ideas. That someone can be both simultaneously dead and be with us. It is a comfortable place for the ego. To remain in control. Where it already knows everything.

I wasn't very good at any of this myself. As I really didn't believe in much. But still, I liked thinking about it every now and again.

As I understood, we were to do what we could to repent. And if by the end of the day, we had reached the limit of our ability, and were still morally flawed, God still would extend his forgiveness.

It seemed that I was meant to understand that without flaw, we are nothing.

That wasn't to say we should embrace our flaws. Or exaggerate them. We were still meant to do what we could to correct them.

But the idea that we could be without them, was a fallacy.

And I suppose, that is what I felt I understood about being a Jew. About what fundamentally divided the Jews from the others. Was that they refused to believe that there could be someone who could transcend their flaws entirely. That enlightenment itself was a facade.

No matter what miracles were performed. No matter what contradictions were endured. Even if a man was resurrected from the dead. He was still only a man. And no man was any more than any other.

No matter our righteousness or our sin. We were all one under God.

In the morning Miriam was downstairs, trying to dress Nora for synagogue. Nora screamed and pulled her arms out of her sweater and ripped off her headband and threw it onto the ground. She tore at her leggings, unable to get them off. She began to cry, more hysterically, holding onto the baby gate and wailing up the stairs.

That is how it feels when you're young and you have to get dressed up to go to synagogue. It is a special form of torture.

We found some open chairs near the back. Again I tried to hold Nora on my lap. But she would not sit still. As she climbed onto the chairs in front of us, Miriam tried to scrape off the snot that had dried under her nose. And I remembered how it felt when my Mom used to do that to me when I was a kid at synagogue.

Miriam took Nora to go walk around and find the kid's area, like the time before.

And I noticed how most people wore sneakers. And I remembered, vaguely, that you weren't supposed to wear leather shoes on Yom Kippur. But I didn't remember why.

I looked at my shoes. The grain of the leather. I looked up at the duct in the ceiling.

The congregation stood as the Torah was removed from the ark. It was held up and I saw the bricks of text on the scroll. The shape the letters made as a whole.

I looked at the empty stroller beside me. The milk stains and dried leaves and crumbs that had fallen into the seat.

The Torah was carried around the room, for all to see. People kissed their books and then touched them to the scrolls as they passed.

But I did not want to kiss the book. I would starve myself for the day, because that's what Miriam did, and I would try to remember to wear my sneakers next time, but for some reason, I did not want to kiss the book.

The Torah went back into the ark.

There was a prayer for those who were sick. And a prayer for those who had died. I read something, some commentary in the margins, as I tried to follow along. About embarrassment. How it was sacred. How it was a blatant signal of our humanity.

That idea seemed, in a way, like it was at the root of all that we were. A way of practicing our humility.

Thousands of years. Refining the myths of shame, of sin, of human error.

Man was created.

Here is everything, God said. Just don't eat the apple.

Man eats the apple.

And so the story began.

In the morning I sat to edit again. I tried to be calm when I read through what I had. To get past the humiliation I felt from what I'd written. I felt ashamed by how weak I seemed. I knew how much it had meant to me to write some of the things that I had, how it came from a place of genuine honesty. But still, in retrospect, it seemed pathetic.

That is what it is to edit. You look at your work and you scrutinize it. To select what to use. To discard what could be discarded. To rewrite some parts. To clarify some meaning. But not to break it. Because it is very easy to break it. To edit so much that it becomes corrupt. I did what I could, until I got to the end of what was there.

And then I went for a run.

And I trimmed my beard.

And I shaved my head.

And I took a shower.

And I trimmed my toenails.

And I trimmed my fingernails.

And I cleaned up my desk.

And I vacuumed all the dust in my office. And then, I sat down, with the edit again. With the shame and the embarrassment and the humiliation of what it had been to me, to be a person.

Because I had read in the margins, that it was a sacred act.

A blatant signal of our humanity.

I went back downstairs. To the kitchen.

And I took an apple from the fridge. I cut it into slices.

Man was created.

Here is everything, God said. Just don’t eat the apple.

I sat and ate the apple.

And so the story began.

# VI

# MANHOOD

Miriam was in the bedroom. Trying to decide which shoes fit best with the way her pants were cut. If the pants were longer. A rounded toe would have been fine. But the way they were, the shoe would need a point. She put on a light blue cardigan. I'd accidentally put it through the dryer some weeks before. But it seemed to look better now. When she lifted her arms, a small section of her stomach showed.

I could see the parts of her body, cropped by the angle of the doorway. She looked at herself in the mirror. Extending her leg. Moving her head downward, and up.

She took off her bra, letting the straps fall down off her shoulders. And she looked up at me, through the mirror.

* * *

She lies in a coffin. I am unsure if she was embalmed or not. There was no funeral, that I was aware of. I don't know what they dressed her in. For Jews it was a white shroud. But she was not a Jew. She was a catholic. A good one, from what I could tell. She knew what it was to sacrifice herself.

The body begins to break down. Foul gases and digestive fluids bloat outward. The tissue liquifies, turning into a dark sludge, until only its skeleton remains.

She has been dead now, for four years. Her flesh bloated and swollen, maybe already having turned into sludge, or having stained the coffin fabric.

I imagine I would recognize her still. I knew the smell of her clothes and her car and her home. Maybe so pungent now, all that is left of it, sealed into a box underground. Four winters under there. As the dirt that surrounds her thaws into the spring mud and dries again in the heat. Her body motionless, as the seasons turn. Until eventually, in another decade or so, at 46, she would be only bones.

Still, there was an idea in your head. That we would be here in some way. After we died.

She had called you. In 2013 or 2014. It was serendipitous in a way. You had just been thinking of her. She told you that she was driving. That she had borrowed her aunt's car for some reason. That she had just been pulled over. That she cried and told the police that her Mom was mad at her or something. And she got out of it. They didn't give her a breathalyzer or anything like that. She convinced them that this was her. That she wasn't drunk or high at all.

She told you that there was cocaine in every nook and cranny of the car. And she was freaking out because she wouldn't be able to clean it all before she had to return it.

I'm fucked, she said. I'm fucked.

She said that she was in so much debt that all she could do now, was kill herself.

I'm going to drive to Canmore or something. And I'm gonna drive this car off of a cliff.

You told her to give up. To stop trying. To surrender. And she listened to you. She went back to the hospital.

Where she had been only a few months earlier.

After a night, or a morning or an afternoon. Spent doing cocaine and having sex in a hotel room with her boyfriend's cousin. After he passed out she decided that she was just going to kill herself.

Her dealer was surprised she asked for fentanyl, since she'd never bought any downers from him before. He asked if she was sure. And she said that she was.

She went back to the hotel room. And took a shower and looked at herself in the mirror. And she felt very good. And then she got into the hotel robe and she lay down and died.

Her boyfriend's cousin found her. And they resuscitated her at the hospital. But they didn't admit her to the psych ward. It was as an accidental drug overdose, they said. Not an attempt to end her life.

And so a few hours later, she had come back from the dead. Here on the earth. Standing on the sidewalk. The cars passing by as they always did. I imagine her in the Ugg boots she always wore, and this kind of pink and green overcoat she had. She stood there, with her twig fawn legs and looked at her cell phone, trying to figure out how to get back to the hotel, where presumably her car was parked.

You told me that she'd described it all so well to you. With so much detail. And somehow that's how you knew that there was no way she wasn't going to try it again.

* * *

I am my mother's only child.

She is a strong and remarkable woman who raised me all on her own. My mother is fiercely independent, creative, and inspiring. She showed me that money and material things have little value in what makes life truly meaningful. My mother is naturally resilient in the face of adversity, and has carried herself without transgression throughout my entire life. Until now, I spent most of my young life feeling ashamed and insecure because I thought I was nothing like my strong and resilient mother. I wish someone could have told me when I was just a little girl that one day after years of learning and life experiences, I would grow into the person I wanted to be. And, for right now (as the little me) I was enough. That being different was perfectly fine.

I met my first best friend at the age of 3, in a toddler's ballet class, where her mother met my mother (both single parents) and a bond formed. I was very different from my friend, both in appearance and personality. I was tall and loud, and I behaved with the mannerisms of a grown up. She was petite and quiet, and the people around us treated her as though she was younger, more delicately than they treated me. The disparity between us was obvious, and my awareness of it made me begin to see a flaw in myself. In comparison to my friend, there must have been something wrong with me, to make people treat her differently (better) than they treated me.

The memories I have of elementary school are tiny reflections of light and happiness. I went to a fine arts school, where creativity was essential. I remember the earthy smell of thick tempera paint and heavy molding clay. I remember what it was like to get easily distracted. Drifting off in the classroom got me in some trouble with my teacher, and my schoolwork suffered. I recalled having a terrible time getting focused and sitting still, I would start crying with frustration. The embarrassment from causing these scenes in the classroom made me never want to go to school. I remember thinking I really was different, that there was really something

wrong with me and I had to change. My behaviour irritated other children, so I would hide in washrooms or in corners of the park during recess and lunch. My social development was becoming more problematic with every passing school year.

I can't recall having a single friend in elementary school. But, by the age of 12 I developed an eating disorder that would never leave my side. Well beyond my school days, and into my adult life.

At the start of junior high I was getting bullied to a point where I needed to change schools. This change was essential to my survival as a teenager. To this day I still feel incredibly grateful for the teachers who welcomed me then, with open hearts and open arms. In an indirect way, those teachers saved my life.

I was 14 when I first started contemplating suicide. During my teens, those thoughts stayed with me and sometimes grew louder during difficult times. There were also times when those thoughts became very quiet, even silenced. I attribute those moments to the times when my teachers made me feel like my life was worth living. In particular, my junior high art teacher. Who knew exactly how to foster my self worth and self esteem. He showed me an alternative way of seeing the beauty in myself, through my artwork. It was in his classroom that I thrived and his encouragement spilled over into motivation to succeed. The environment that my art teacher created for his students was not only safe, but also liberating. It was a place where individual diversity and authenticity was encouraged above all things.

I spent most of my days in high school wandering the halls, or skipping class altogether. I felt disconnected from others, and only engaged in independent creative tasks. Looking back, I wish any of those teachers, who caught me wandering, instead of sending me to the office, would

you have asked me where I was going. Why was I always wandering the halls when I should have been in class? Where was I going? And why did I look so sad? But no one ever asked me those questions.

I would meet my mentor and friend, a professor at the University of Victoria, in my third year of university. He was an outstanding human, and he made the most significant impact on my life. There was something about him that made everyone around him feel like the master of their own universe. He inspired so many people to be the best version of themselves, to create meaning wherever and whenever possible. If one day I am privileged enough to become a teacher myself, his legacy will live on for many years.

When he passed away, I was living in Calgary and working a job I hated with people I had nothing in common with. His death was traumatizing for me and came at a time when I wasn't in the best health to cope with the loss. I turned to substance use and became isolated. The substance use, coupled with my ongoing eating disorder, intensified my depression. It didn't take long for me to reach a breaking point. I knew there were only two options for me, I was either going to kill myself or get help immediately.

I made the right choice. I've spent the last three years in recovery, through every available service that the province has to offer. I attend weekly therapy sessions, medical appointments, and other supports through Calgary's Eating Disorder Program. And In February 2017, I completed every level of treatment at the Calgary Addiction Center.

Most people are likely to experience a traumatic event in their life, and for all of us, pain is unavoidable. We must pay careful attention to any pain or suffering, in ourselves and others. And we must be able to respond accordingly.

Through my own recovery, I have learned that how people are affected, how they cope, and in what way they are able to recover from trauma varies. I know that I have continued to overcome many challenges in the face of adversity. I have grown resilient and I can confidently say that I have been able to create a meaningful life for myself.

* * *

oh hey josh!

how's it going?

just a few things i want to address:

for the duration of months that i spent without contact from you i watched a lot of television shows, spent too much money on booze and take out, and ate/drank myself into a coma at least 50% of the week. i think this kind of living is what they call "real depression."

i've realized that the most important thing about our relationship over the years is the motivation component. above all things, there have been few people to influence and motivate

me as much as you do when we are being positive forces in each others lives. as well, i am confident that my support/ efforts of motivation towards you and your endeavours have always been superior.

i know there is some truth in the idea that we must all find our motivation from within, from the self, etc. yet, i am very aware that this idea is often not enough. at least in my case it isn't. if we can be positive reinforcements in each others lives- at least in the creative sense of things- then i am certain we can do great things for each other. that being said, i want to make very clear my expectations and wishes for our friendship so as not to be misunderstood or misinterpreted at any point forward. in the past i have let my emotions and my feelings towards you become explosive, uncontrollable, and threatening. i am a compulsive person, you know this about me. in life, i always feel like i can never get enough (of anything and everything). i have to be careful not to spiral out of control, consuming. i do not want to be hurtful to myself or others, you know this about me too. i know that in the past my intentions have been problematic. i can admit now that my intentions begin at a good place, but can get carried away if i feel in need of something (this i can't really explain that well), ending in a negative place. in the last few months i have spent a lot of time coming to terms with difficult truths- about myself and the reality of things- and there is some sense of clarity now.

i have accepted that you have never loved me in the way that i wanted you to love me and that this kind of expectation/ desire is one that is impossible to achieve from anyone/ anything (part of what i am learning about myself is this feeling of never being satisfied).

i can admit with clarity that i have the capability of being a very manipulative, dishonest, and irrational person.

i can also admit that i have the capability to change (if only inching) and to be honest.

i also know that it isn't healthy for me to be more than your friend because i find it impossible to be fully comfortable, or just myself (in ways that i can be with others) when we are together. it's because i hold you up on a pedestal or something. i think it has something to do with never having a permanent father figure. like i used to think about my grandpa in this way, where he was the king and i always had to be perfect for him. i can admit now that i have treated you this way, that there was this element of performance i had to maintain with you. like i could go to any extreme to make sure i seemed perfect, even if it was totally dishonest. a prime example is when i plagiarized your paper last year. efforts of insane measure. coming to terms with these realities has helped me to see that a certain amount of distance is necessary between us. this kind of distance is something i'm learning to give all of my relationships with people and things, to prevent losing control of my compulsive and all consuming tendencies, and to avoid this destructive idolizing behaviour i have of others.

so i guess my point is, i don't want to be misunderstood, and i want to be an honest person. a person who is happy with being me (even if I don't really know what that means yet).

i want to know if my actions or the things i say become at all problematic or inconsiderate of your boundaries.

i don't want my presence in your life to make you feel uncomfortable or uneasy (about me or my intentions). because even i am uncertain about my intentions. which i have to stress, is something i really want to work on.

but i need the help of others in my life. they need to know what's going on here, so i can't get away with being so fucked up anymore. i don't want to fuck up anymore!!

i want you to trust that i have no hidden agenda by being your friend, because i don't even know if i can be your friend. it is going to take time for me. not just with you, but everyone in my life. i say this because in the past there were instances where i have not been honest about my intentions, or about the things i've said and done, where i have not been honest!

and i've done things that are manipulative and troubling (like sneaking into your apartment to leave you paintings, gifts, etc.)

so, i don't want to go through anymore long spells of doing nothing and feeling terrible, and being fucked up and lying about everything.

i hope you understand that this was really hard for me to do.

thank you josh, for taking the time to read this email.

i hope it will be better.

* * *

I lay on the ground. Miriam and Nora had built a bed for me. Out of couch cushions and blankets. Miriam sat, her back touched against my stomach. Nora brought me a water bottle and kept telling me to drink. She patted my head. And then she began hitting it, but then understood to only do so gently. And then she got her bunny to pat gently as well.

I began to cry. Not because I was sick or sad to leave them. But because I belonged to them. And that they were there.

Toronto airport. Back to Calgary again.

Ask him what he wants for supper when he gets here, my Mom said.

Your mom wants to know what you want for supper when you get here.

Steak.

He wants steak.

But I already took out a chicken, my Mom said.

I sat at the gate, drinking coffee. I opened the sandwich Miriam had packed for me. Crumbs fell onto my lap. I brushed them onto the ground. I was reminded then, of a letter I'd been meaning to write.

To Whom It May Concern,

In the event of my death I hereby leave all of my assets and inheritances, financial and otherwise to the love of my life — Miriam Liat Barsky.

This is my last will and testament.

03/05/25

Joshua Hillel Barsky.

I sent Miriam a photo of the page from my notebook. And she sent me a photo of Nora sleeping on the baby monitor, hugging her bunny.

Sitting and waiting. Purgatory.

Across the gate. The last time we flew, I remembered the wet muck from the carpet soaking into my knee as I collapsed Nora's stroller. It was irrelevant to me at the time but it seemed that now it had become a memory.

I sat at the back of the plane, watching all of the people moving around in their seats, cramming their bags overhead. A woman asked the flight attendant if she could help her switch seats so that she could sit beside her husband. The flight attendant responded, and said there was nothing she could do for her.

When the plane began to move. I messaged Miriam, that I loved her x the infinity symbol and then wrote a bunch of random numbers.

I love you more than that, she wrote back.

The plane turned towards the runway and then stopped for a moment. The power of the engines increased and we began to move again. I watched the wing wobble from the window.

As the plane went upwards the buildings and the houses and the trees shrunk below us and became new shapes as we lifted farther off of the ground. My wife and my daughter, among the millions of people below. Each with a love that was infinitely more than anything else there was. All of that love, copy and pasted, millions of times over.

I flew upward, away from it all. And I became a tiny dot. A window at the back of a passing plane.

Calgary.

A woman in front of me on the escalator. I asked her to move her suitcase out of the way. I stepped past her. Outside the terminal. The resolution heightened. The air was different. It felt less merciful. And somehow more realistic.

I stood on the curb. A man offered me a taxi. I ignored him and then for some reason felt pissed off that he asked.

My Mom's car appeared. I saw her silhouette and my Dad's silhouette through the windshield. The familiarity of it brought me back to being as young as I could remember.

She became distracted, looking at me through the rearview mirror. Her attention drifted from the road, and the car softly veered. My Dad told her to speed up and move into the right lane. She turned the wheel, onto Deerfoot. The yellow grass blurred through the window.

There was time in the morning there, when it was quiet. The pine trees were black and their shadows were also black on the road. The sky began, tyrannical and purple.

I boiled eggs and thought of being in a restaurant. When the server came to ask what kind of eggs I wanted, I would say, as is would be fine. And she would bring me two whole eggs, cold from the carton, in a little dish. And I would thank her.

My Mom came downstairs and asked what I was laughing about. I told her it was nothing. She asked again and I said that Miriam said it was windy in Toronto.

When my Dad came down he said that he was tired. That he didn't want to do anything. He turned on the TV and switched between hockey and the news. I peeled an egg over the sink.

I drove my Mom's car. Trying to get more washer fluid. We walked through a woman's clothing store in a strip mall. I played chess on my phone while she tried things on. She was mostly uninterested in what was there, except for a shirt that she liked. A long white blouse with a colourful outline of a horizon. Small buildings that seemed like they were from another era. They looked perhaps like they were made by people with hands and flesh and muscles and bones. We went to another store where she found nothing and then afterward we went to pick my nephew up from school. It was the same place I'd gone when I was his age, some 35 years ago.

We waited on a small wooden bench in the hallway. I had memories of being there. It must have been in that same room. Of a crippling shyness. It was insurmountable, how afraid I was to speak in front of the others. And I could only whisper to the girl who stood next to me.

When his class ended my nephew walked out of the classroom and looked up at me.

It's Uncle Josh, he said.

We went to the McDonald's afterward, for lunch. I watched him push his face against the display case under the till. I was the same as him, at this McDonald's, when I was his age. However many years ago.

I thought of any toughness, or any wisdom I thought that I'd acquired in the years that I'd lived. And I saw how laughable it was. This fantasy of having any grit in the world, the facade I put on, when I grew my beard long and thought I knew something about the way things were. I was still no different than he was. Pushing my face against the glass, to see what was there.

He didn't want to talk much. Instead we sat and played with the toy that came with his happy meal. A Princess Peach race car. He just wanted to drive it up and down the side of the chair, across the table through the nuggets and ketchup packets and fries.

At home I talked to Miriam and Nora on face time. Nora wanted me to twitch my nose like a bunny. She took raspberries and pieces of her peanut butter toast and tried to feed them to me through the screen.

Eat Dada, eat! She said.

Miriam told me about their time at the petting zoo that afternoon. How Nora loved the bison she saw.

Bee-sun, Bee-sun, Bee-sun, she said.

We went for a walk afterward, to get coffee. The door at the coffee shop was all boarded up. The woman working there said they'd been robbed. Someone smashed through the glass and

taken the register. My Mom stood outside while I waited for our coffees. My Dad went to the convenience store to buy a lottery ticket.

Did you make me a main character in your book? he asked.

I did, I said.

Good.

He walked ahead of us. My Mom and I stopped to look in a little library on the neighbour's lawn. Nothing new.

My Dad was farther ahead of us. He turned around to see how far behind we were. He was wearing his sunglasses. His toque was propped straight up on his head. His sweater was tucked into his pants. The sleeves of his jacket fit long over his hands.

He is still here, I thought. That is him.

He is not dead.

He is here.

We walked through the neighbourhood and he showed me all of the construction sites that he'd been telling me about on the phone. Pits of gravel. Rebar and concrete.

He stopped at the end of the street. He looked upward and pointed to a woodpecker.

Woody, he said.

When we came home, he sat on the couch, and turned on the news. He wrote a message on his phone to someone. Sounding out the words as he went along.

What do you call it? He asked me.

W-O-N-R-I-N-D…

Wondering? I asked.

That's right.

He continued along until he was stumped again.

A-Ki-Za, A-Ki-Za-Sin, A-Ki-Za-Sin.

C-I-T

A-Ki-Za-Sin

Citizens.

I continued to work on the edit. I deleted some. I rewrote some. Some things were okay as they were.

* * *

As I understood. We were made from tiny specks. Atoms, smaller than any light we could see. And inside those atoms were what we called nuclei.

There was a machine we could use. That could show us the reality of what we were.

Magnetic Resonance Imaging, they called it. An MRI.

We were to lie down, naked in the machine, staying perfectly still.

The machine would then create a magnetic field around us. And it would send a frequency out, to knock our nuclei out of place.

I had thought that it would feel odd, to lie still in the machine, as our nuclei rattled around. But I was made to understand that it did not feel like anything.

As the nuclei realigned, they would transmit a new signal back to the machine. The signal was then measured and converted back into grey pixels, as an image of what we were.

This new signal had a similar frequency to the kind we could catch with an antenna. Like the kind that might have been on an old TV, with the two metal rods, that stuck out like bunny ears.

Nora reached her hand out, so that Miriam would hand her her new bunny. She took it and held it to her cheek. She walked in a circle shouting, bunny, bunny, bunny, bunny!

Miriam tried to catch her, to change her diaper, but she escaped and ran naked across the room. She pounded her fist against the door, demanding for it to be opened. Miriam followed her down the hall, holding the phone so I could see.

Nora ran into my office. To Mouse's cat tree. She reached her hand upward and pulled down his bag of treats.

He waited patiently as she scooped out some treats and dropped them into his bowl. She laughed as he ate them. She patted him on the head and then ran away again.

My Dad came downstairs. His hair was all messed up. He said he'd slept better than the night before. That he was better off having quit the sleeping pills he'd been taking.

Cold turkey, he kept saying.

He made himself a bowl of cereal and came back to the couch to eat it.

Alberta Health Services.

Holy Cross Centre.

Rehabilitation Oncology.

Second West Green Elevators.

My Mom went on her phone and my Dad went on his phone. I sat on the ledge across from them and then went on my phone as well.

They guided us down a hallway to a small room. The three of us sat along the wall, the speech therapist across from my Dad.

She asked him how things were going.

He said they were good. Except for the sleeping pills he'd been taking. But he was done with them now. Cold turkey, he said.

They talked about an exercise she'd given him at their last appointment. He said he was able to do it, but it had become too easy since he'd memorized all the answers.

The therapist asked my Mom and I how he'd been doing.

We talked about his aphasia. I explained that sometimes he said different numbers than he wrote. That he was able to write the numbers that he meant, but sometimes he would say different ones. And he usually mixed up denominations. Sometimes he could see the need to correct himself, but other times he didn't.

The therapist talked about the connection between memory and speech, how it could be improved with practice.

She took a deck of cards. When she would turn a card over, my Dad was to say its number and its suit without error. If he made a mistake, he had to start again. He asked if there were any jokers in the mix. She said that there were. He laughed.

She began with the cards.

Four hearts.

Eight hearts.

Queen clubs.

He got frustrated by the monotony of the exercise and began telling the therapist that most days he'd been reading aloud stories from an exercise book my sister gave him. But it depended on what was going on. On Thursday, he went with the kids, he said. So he couldn't do any reading that day.

He told her he did a lot of walking, that yesterday had been very nice out, that he did 80,000 steps.

She looked at me, understanding what I'd said before.

Eight thousand, I said.

That's right, eight thousand, my Dad said.

She asked him if there were any board games at home that he could play. That some of them could help his speech. But he said he didn't like games like that. He said that when computers first started out, he played games, when they were simple. Solitaire mostly. But now it wasn't the same.

She took him through another exercise. Having him read a recipe for pancakes.

She said that the longer the sequence, the harder it would be to recall. That it would help him to break up the information. And if he made an error, she would cut him off, and they would start again.

Good old-fashioned pancakes. He said. Original recipe. Years.

She got him to start again.

Yields, she said.

Years. He repeated.

Yields.

Yeards.

Yields.

Yeats.

Yields.

Yeats.

He didn't start from the beginning like she told him to. Instead, he moved on.

Eight servings. Ingredients. One and a half cups all-purpose flour. Three tablespoons butter. Melted. One yarge egg.

She stopped him. One large egg, she said.

One yarge egg.

Large.

I've seen this recipe before, he said.

She tried to get him to start again. But instead, he talked about the sleeping pills. He said he was getting better now that he'd quit taking them. I could see her confusion by the jump in logic.

He's usually able to talk better in the mornings, I said. It's harder when he's tired.

He told her he was getting better now that he'd quit taking the sleeping pills.

She said that it would be good to practice in the mornings.

He changed the subject. He took his cell phone and showed her a picture of my niece, dressed as a skunk on Halloween.

My skunk, he said to her and laughed. He showed her a picture of an award he'd gotten from the Dental Association. He talked to her about the construction in our neighbourhood. All of the traffic that came along with it. He told her about the Chinese food restaurant that we went to, that they knew him by name there.

When we came home, he sat on the couch and turned on the TV. I sat in the chair by the window.

I thought of being back in Toronto. How I would think about this time when I was there and try to write about it. How I would try to remember all of the details exactly as they were. But inevitably, despite even the most honest intention, they would become fiction.

My Dad wrote a message to someone on his phone.

Habitation. He said. Habadashion. Habatation.

Rehab? I asked him.

Yes.

R-E.

Habilitation.

Start with R-E, I said.

Habit.

R-E, I said.

H-E.

R.

R. He typed.

E

R-E

R-E-H

R-E-H. Rehabilitation, he said. Rehabilitation oncology.

That's it, I said.

We were quiet for a bit. And then he looked over and asked me about my writing. He asked if I ever wrote about that friend of mine. The girl who died. I told him that I had. And I was surprised that he asked me that. That somehow he knew where my thoughts had been. He said he thought about her every now and again. About how sad it was, what happened to her. She was a kind person, he said.

He asked me about Miriam. About what it was like when I first met her. I had told him the story before, but it seemed that he wanted to hear it again.

2018, I think. I'd started a new job, to produce a film. I came home at the end of the day, to the girl I was dating at the time, and she asked me how it went. I told her about the other producer I was going to be working with. Her name was Miriam.

That girlfriend, intuitive as she was, would break things off only a few days later. She told me it was the look on my face and the way that I talked about Miriam, on that first day I met her. She said it was clear to her in that moment, that that was what was missing about the way I'd felt about her. And she was right.

I remember exactly how I felt, the first time I saw Miriam. The way she walked across the room.

My Dad liked that kind of story. The serendipity of it. That perhaps some things were meant to be. I think, because it affirmed how things had been in his life. When he met my Mom.

Does she read everything you write? He asked.

She does, I said.

She's a bright girl. It's good you have her to fix your work.

After lunch my Mom and I went to Costco. My Dad stayed back. He said he wasn't quite feeling up to it.

On the drive there, we talked about how the next day would go. After they dropped me off at the airport, they would go back to the hospital for my Dad to have his next MRI.

And I would be gone again. I would be on a plane going back to the place that I lived.

We drove along Crowchild, passing over the bridge. We talked about my Dad. That this would be his last round of chemotherapy.

And that they could not give him anymore.

I imagined my Dad. Throwing the ball into the air. How it would pop off of the bat and soar into the sky.

As we passed by the reservoir, I saw that the water hadn't frozen over yet. And I thought of how it would look when it did. If I would be back by then. Or if it would have already frozen and thawed by the time I was there again.

I looked at the water as we passed it, imagining what it would be, not seeing the reality of what it was.

I sat by the window. It was early, there was no sun. I looked at the tree outside the window. My Dad had told me that was his wind stick. It told him all he needed to know about how things were out there.

He was still asleep and so was my Mom. I had some time to write. And as usual, there was nothing to say. But somehow, as I sat, stabbing at the keys, something began to form. And I suppose that is what it had been for me. To sit and to be there, for that to happen.

On the way back to the airport.

I remembered the view from the window of a hotel Miriam and I had stayed at a few years before. I had gotten sick on the flight. Vomiting during takeoff, into that little bag. They are well designed, I realized. How perfectly they fit around a puking mouth. The wire folded so effortlessly, neatly sealing the bile and acid into the bag.

I got out of my seat to go to the toilet. The flight attendant asked me to sit down, but I told her it was not possible. She admitted that she couldn't actually stop me.

And so I sat on the toilet and blasted diarrhea diagonally into the bowl. Desperately holding onto the rail as we climbed farther into the sky.

When we landed Miriam booked us a room, a few minutes from the airport. So we wouldn't bring whatever illness I had to my Mom and Dad.

I lay in the hotel bed for two days while Miriam prepared for her job interview. In a way, the hotel background might actually have been favourable, I rationalized, so long as her husband, naked, shitting and vomiting from the bed behind her wasn't in frame.

The morning after her interview, I stood at the window, looking at the road — the reverse angle of where this tangent began.

Oh my God. Miriam said. Oh my God.

She took a step out of the bathroom, looking down at a pregnancy stick.

I don't remember what we said after that exactly, but I remember the joy of it was as ordinary as it was new.

And that was when our life began.

* * *

Calgary, back to Toronto.

She put vaseline on my lip. It was dry from the mountain air. Nora held her bunny as Miriam got her dressed.

We ate our eggs. Nora took my hand and my arm and she pulled me, running to her bookshelf.

Colours, she said. Colours, colours!

She reached upward to the plastic bag of crayons. I got them for her, off her bookshelf. She took her notebook and threw it onto the carpet and stepped on it until the spine of it broke.

Open, Dada, open, she said.

She dumped all of the colours onto the ground. Digging through them until she found the neon pink one.

Purple, she said and held it above her head.

Pink, Nora, pink, I said.

Purple.

I showed her the purple one.

Purple, I said.

We coloured more, scribbling however we wanted. Llamas and deer. A monkey, a flower. Bunnies.

Bunnies, bunnies! She said.

She jumped up. For me to put on her Sleeping Bunnies song. We listened to it five or six times, again and again jumping around the room.

She climbed into a cardboard box. A race car.

Dada push, Dada push!

Okay, ready Nor? I asked.

Ready, she said.

I pushed her across the floor as fast as I could. She held onto the edges of the box. Her head flew back, and a smile appeared on her face. Across the living room, drifting through the kitchen and back to the carpet. Screeching on the brakes. I hurled myself into the couch, trying to get the biggest reaction from her.

Ready! Ready! She said.

Around again. And again. Until I had no breath and could not go on. I lay on the ground beside her, without any breath. And she pulled my fingers with both of her hands.

Dada turn! Dada turn! Ready! Ready! She said.

And so we went around again. And again and again. Until it was time for daycare.

Across the room. Sitting on the step, to put her shoes on.

No Dada! No! She would not wear any of her shoes or to let me wear mine. She threw them at the door and at the race car box.

Mama's neon green sandals, each on the wrong foot. Stomping around, reaching her hand out to me so that she wouldn't fall.

She went through every shoe in the closet. Until finally, she decided that the pink snow boots would be best. I pulled her sweater over her head, she screamed for moment, until her head popped out. And I zipped up her jacket.

But she did not want her yellow hat. She only wanted her pink bear hat. But it had become so small on her. Still, we made it work.

Carrying her down the sidewalk, and trying to get her mittens on.

She repeated all of the names of her friends and teachers and she talked about her pink bear hat. Ears, ears, ears, she said.

Dada hat blue, she said. Dada hat blue.

Around the sidewalk. One of her teachers carried a plastic bag out to the dumpster.

Found a little critter this morning, he said.

Squirrel? I asked.

Rat, he said.

Great.

Getting colder.

I nodded.

In the doorway, she was a bit more clingy than usual, until she saw the craft set out. Construction paper. Pink and purple sparkles. She ran off, and I went back. To sit and to edit the book.

Procrastinating, I messaged Miriam. That we should go later and buy Nora a new bear hat. The other one was too small now.

Picking her up from daycare, saying hello to the deer statues on the way home. Holding her at the fridge door, to get her bottle. Chugging it up the stairs. Changing her out of the clothes she wore and dressing her into pyjamas. Some drops of milk had fallen onto her cheek. I wiped them into my hand. And we took the elastics from her pigtails, careful not to pull on her hair.

We sat in the rocking chair and read the new book we'd got from the library. I tried to sing to her. She yawned as I put her down. She hugged bunny and I closed the curtains.

In my office, sitting and watching the baby monitor. A minute passed. She was fast asleep. Typing some as she slept. Whatever came to me. Until she woke up again.

Slowly opening the door and opening the blinds. She showed me her stuffed animals. She wanted me to take them and then pass them back to her through the bars of her crib.

To change her diaper. She screamed and tried to squirm away. I put on youtube. Ms. Rachel and Elmo singing about the colours of the rainbow.

To the bathroom counter. I gave her her toothbrush and she gave me mine. I turned on the water to trickle as low as it would. And we brushed our teeth.

Bubbles! She shouted when she saw the toothpaste foam in my mouth. Bubbles! Bubbles! She laughed.

We spit into the sink. And then she said, all done.

Down the hall, Miriam was working from the bed. Nora climbed up to see her. She reached her hand out, asking for the cat stuffed animal on the bedside.

I turned to reach it, when Miriam gasped and tried to grab Nora, but was not able to in time.

She fell, floating limbless off of the bed, knocking her chin and scraping her face on the rug on the way down. She cried. Airlessly at first. I reached and held her body in my arm.

Touching her face and her forehead and her cheeks and her nose and her mouth. To see how she was hurt. If she was ok.

She howled into the ceiling.

I rocked her back and forth, trying to calm her like when she was an infant. But she was not an infant anymore.

Crying hysterically, her mouth filled with blood. The redness of the scratches on her nose and above her lip began to bleed. I told her she was okay, that she was okay, that it was okay, over and over again, holding her head close to mine.

Holding her near the window to see the dogs and the cars on the street. She settled for a moment, until a wave of pain brought her back to her cry.

I passed her back to her Mom. She held her in the rocking chair, gently cleaning the new blood that was there, singing to her and cradling her back and forth, until she was calm again.

At the store to get her a new bear hat. We found one that was very similar to the last one, but this one was fuzzier and warmer. Nora liked it. I stayed with her while Miriam tried some clothes on.

We went to the shoe section. Every pair came off of the shelf until she found some bright pink sequinned Uggs.

Dada help! Dada, she said. I lifted her and put her into the boots. They went up past her knees. A security tag held them together. She shuffled her feet and screamed joyfully. I knelt down beside her. Holding my hand on the corners of the shelves so that they were no longer sharp.

I lifted her to take her back to see what her Mom was doing. But she thrashed and yelled, desperate to get back to the shoes.

Fine, I said. And she ran back and sat on the ground and took the pink boots again. She put them on and then took them off, preferring to wear them on the wrong feet.

She took my hand and pulled me to a tall mirror at the end of the wall.

We stood in front of ourselves.

Nora and I.

She looked up at me and I saw for a moment, in our reflection, that she did not see me for who I thought I was. Instead, she saw me in a way that was more pure than that. That I was all that she knew, as my Dad to me, was all that I knew.

She climbed onto the bench and reached upward and beat her hands against our reflection. Laughing hysterically and screaming. Bursting with life, like the beginning of all that there was and smudging the glass, obliterating whatever profound truth I thought I saw.

I picked her up and threw her over my shoulder. And she cried desperately again, trying with all that she had to break free, yanking at the fabrics that hung from the aisles, fighting for dear life to get back to the shoe rack. But this time, there would be no escape. And I held her and I lifted her up and up, towards the fluorescence, and she screamed with her laughter, screaming and laughing in the whole and absolute explosion of light that she was.

On our way back to find her Mom.

* * *

In the psychiatrist's office, waiting for my appointment. I thought about the morning, when we'd woken up. I stood at the sink while Miriam sat on the toilet. She wiped herself and a long red streak appeared on the paper. And when she stood up, there was a glob of blood at the bottom of the toilet, blurring and dissolving in the water.

The meeting was short. I explained to the psychiatrist how everything had been. We agreed that the best thing to do would be to keep doing what I was.

I had some time before I needed to get home. Before Nora would wake up from her nap. I was near the art gallery. I decided to stop in and see one of the new shows that I'd been looking forward to.

There was one photo that I recognized. It reminded me of a younger version of myself. I remembered how I looked for meaning in it then. Sure that it must be there somewhere. But looking at it again, all of these years later, I could see that my intuition had been correct. There was nothing there. Instead, what I noticed, more than anything, was how the paper had degraded over time. How it warbled inside the frame.

There was a sculpture there. A bit taller than I was. A man cast in iron. It didn't mean much to me as I looked at it. Instead I felt impatient and critical of all of the rust that had formed onto it. The cast iron pan I had at home, I was so careful with it. To dry it properly every time I used it so that it would not rust.

There were some drawings on display beside the sculpture. Of some rain clouds and books. I thought of the pictures Nora and I had been doing together at home. The joy of being able to colour with her. Our llamas and happy faces and scribbles. Those pictures in the notebook we were filling up, how together, our colouring felt so much more vital than anything I saw in that room.

I stopped at the McDonald's on the way home. In an underground food court. I stood in the line, annoyed by how crowded it was, these people from all walks of life.

I ordered a small coffee with two creams. Finally, I didn't upsize to the medium. Maybe that was my character arc, if anything, of what this book had been. Finally, ordering the small coffee, like I knew I should have. I ordered a value burger as well, with extra ketchup. It cost $4.96 for everything. I was impressed with myself for keeping my order under 5$.

I took the paper bag and looked through all of the seats. I didn't want to take one of the four seaters, thinking it would be rude to take up all that space, but there was nothing else. So I went back to get it, but some woman beat me to it.

I walked around again, eventually sitting in a handicapped spot near the garbage can. I unwrapped the hamburger. I was happy to see how the ketchup smeared out of it.

I went onto my cell phone as I ate. I looked at my chess app. I'd been on a winning streak for a few games. It was probably the best I'd ever done. But the last move I'd made was so idiotic. I lost my queen for nothing, and now I was surely fucked.

I looked at the people around me. And I was reminded of the iron sculpture I'd seen at the gallery before. How its foreskin seemed to envelop its body entirely.

How strange it was, I thought. That way of being. The default form. How unfamiliar it was to me. When I was born, they had taken a knife and cut that part of me away, throwing it into the trash like any other useless thing.

My manhood. At the core of my being, inevitably I was inauthentic and flawed.

And there was nothing to be done about it.

I sat with the strangers in the food court, eating my hamburger, and I could see how ordinary life could be. I could see how I used to be an outsider, posing as an ordinary man. But it seemed now, I was as ordinary as anyone else.

Who I was, what I wanted. Every single person around me had their own version of being the centre of their universe.

How little any of us mattered.

We knew we were nothing, but still, we needed some kind of fiction to assign some meaning to it all.

I thought of the night earlier. Miriam and I, until we were no longer Miriam and I. We were only so careful, at risk of creating new life.

And until finally then, there was a moment when an object floated above us. A covenant of sorts. Some terminal thing. In both its inception and demise. Between gravity and non-gravity and resistance and non-resistance. A fractured milk glow. Something that was both near life and near death. But it was as well, neither of those things.

The object fell then, towards its maximum velocity. Landing on a small section, near the bottom of her stomach.

And I thought to message her then. To let her know where I was. And that I would be home, before Nora was awake.

2025

Toronto, Canada

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